Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 11521
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11521

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

(Re)Contextualizing Organizing Inequities: The Communicative Production of Worker Vulnerability in Global Supply Chains

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Submitted: 13 October 2025 **Accepted:** 12 March 2026 **Published:** 29 April 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Communicating Risk, Trust, and Resilience Among Diverse and Marginalised Populations" edited by Ian Somerville (University of Leicester) and Jenny Zhengye Hou (Queensland University of Technology), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i507

Abstract

Global supply chains are the infrastructure of contemporary capitalism and produce, define, and determine the vulnerabilities of labor. Yet much communication inquiry into work conditions does not position either risk or vulnerabilities of labor with regard to these global chains. For organizational communication studies, supply chains also offer an opportunity to recontextualize work inequities and vulnerabilities by moving beyond container metaphors of organizing and single-case studies. This article, therefore, draws upon multiple ethnographic projects conducted in India and China to examine the vulnerabilities faced by various marginalized worker groups enmeshed in global supply chains to identify three communicative conditions that fundamentally shape these vulnerabilities: fluidity, visibility, and disarticulation. Fluidity is explored through a study of fast-fashion workers in China, a primary sourcing hub for global mega-platforms such as Shein and Temu. Visibility is examined via onion supply chains in India, focusing on women whose labor is collectively essential but individually disposable. Finally, disarticulation highlights how garment workers in global cotton supply chains in India are severed from their communities, livelihoods, and each other. We argue that analyzing worker vulnerability necessitates attention to all three communicative conditions, advocating for the use of multi-sited ethnographies as a means to grasp these vulnerabilities.

Keywords

disarticulation; fluidity; labor; supply chains; visibility; vulnerability

1. Introduction

Supply chains—sprawling, transnational, multi-tiered systems that connect producers, suppliers, intermediaries, and consumers across continents—now face an intensifying confluence of crises that span logistical, geopolitical, environmental, technological, and social domains. The fragilities that the Covid-19 pandemic revealed continue to disrupt global supply chains, compounded by logistical and operational disruptions, increasing volatility of trade policies and the vagaries of tariffs, acute material shortages, infrastructural bottlenecks, technological risks, and climatic shocks. Even as AI technologies transform supply chains into highly sophisticated systems by enabling predictive analytics, optimization, and automation, a persistent and prevailing crisis deepens—the systemic vulnerability of labor.

Ethical and legal accountabilities in modern supply chains depend on robust communicative capacities, especially the ability to collect, verify, and exchange information across multiple tiers. As governance regimes increasingly mandate verifiability and transparency, organizations face growing pressure to build information systems that can meaningfully trace labor conditions and reveal human rights risks embedded deep within production networks. However, persistent structural inequities, fragmented data, lack of transparency, and weak cross-tier communication allow exploitation to remain hidden, suggesting that communication failures significantly contribute to supply chain crises. Thus, communication is not merely an administrative function but the very infrastructure through which supply chains fulfil or neglect their responsibilities to prevent labor abuse and address broader global challenges.

Workers in the Global South remain the most invisible and precarious link in supply chains, facing hazardous working conditions, limited rights, and acute risks. For instance, in Bangladesh's garment sector, workers face wage theft, repression, and unsafe working conditions; despite supplying major global brands, many factories routinely pay below minimum wages and retaliate against union activity (Anner, 2019). Fast-fashion brands relying on such labor often escape scrutiny, despite sharing factories and labor conditions, due to differences in consumer perception and uneven parameters of corporate visibility (Shirgholami & Cole, 2025). Similarly, vulnerabilities experienced by migrant, gendered, and marginalized labor have been documented in industries such as cobalt mining (Amnesty International, 2024; Faber et al., 2017), cocoa production (Barrientos, 2014; LeBaron & Gore, 2020), and cottonseed production (Ramamurthy, 2011). These examples underscore how supply chains rely on vulnerable labor, shielded by layers of informal work, weak enforcement of ethical standards, and fragmented governance.

We therefore aim to understand and grapple with these acute vulnerabilities of labor and examine the broad global communicative conditions under which these vulnerabilities are shaped. We ask: How do specific communicative conditions in supply chain relationships generate and intensify risks of worker vulnerability? In particular, we adopt a constitutive perspective to examine three communicative conditions that characterize worker vulnerability in supply chain contexts: fluidity, visibility, and disarticulation. We conceptualize vulnerability not merely as an economic inevitability but as an outcome of relational and discursive organizational practices.

Our analysis treats communication as a generative force that produces worker vulnerability, a form of risk that, when unaddressed, escalates into ongoing crises across multiple organizations and organizing sites. In doing so, we position supply chains as ongoing, dynamic, relational, and contested organizing processes

embedded in the day-to-day lives of actors. From a communicative standpoint, fluidity captures the continual movement and reconfiguration of social relations where communication shapes shifting boundaries, identities, and roles. Visibility refers to the discursive processes governing whose presence is amplified or muted within organizational settings. Disarticulation denotes the communicative severing of workers from the social, spatial, and institutional ties that sustain them, producing patterns of isolation within supply chains.

We seek to shed light on the multifacetedness of global labor vulnerabilities by synthesizing three studies of labor in supply chains from the Global South, namely India and China. We begin by outlining our three main sensitizing concepts—fluidity, visibility, and disarticulation—followed by our methods. We then present the first case on fluidity, drawn from an ethnographic study of upstream garment workers in the global fast fashion chain in China. For the second case, we turn our attention to a regional agricultural supply chain in Maharashtra, India. Finally, for the third case, we turn back to the garment industry focusing on cotton mill workers in sustainable organic cotton supply chains in India. Lastly, we discuss the implications of the vulnerabilities and crises produced by the three communicative conditions.

2. Supply Chains in Crisis: Vulnerability, Fluidity, Visibility, and Disarticulation

Communication processes are deeply implicated in how contemporary vulnerabilities are both constituted and experienced (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). Such vulnerabilities are produced at a global scale (Stohl & Ganesh, 2025) and deeply embedded in capitalist crises. Yet, research in organizational communication has not deeply considered how we might think through worker vulnerabilities in these global terms. Global supply chains represent one locus for such inquiry, and only a few organizational communication studies have been conducted on the subject (Dempsey et al., 2023; Ganesh et al., 2025).

We understand worker vulnerability in supply chains specifically as the social and material precariousness experienced by workers on a day-to-day basis. Scholars such as LeBaron and Gore (2020), Bair (2005), and Phillips (2013) have examined how vulnerability in global supply and commodity chains is not episodic but is structurally produced through business models reliant on economic liberalization, subcontracting, and opaque labor governance structures. LeBaron's (2021) research highlights that vulnerability is not merely an individual actor's condition but is systemically and trans-organizationally embedded in supply chains. Migrant and forced labor are especially exposed to vulnerability due to their exclusion from formal governance mechanisms, cost pressures, limited bargaining power, and corporate outsourcing. Such risks are typically impelled onto disposable workers. Research shows that corporate social responsibility initiatives often fail to address these systemic drivers of supply chains and make little progress in fulfilling commitments for living wages and instead focus on superficial compliance that retains deeper vulnerabilities (LeBaron et al., 2022). Phillips (2011) argues that governance in global production establishes hierarchical forms of vulnerabilities where informal and migrant labor is rendered exploitable through legal and geographic detachment between workers and the firms that profit from their labor.

In this study, we move beyond these logistical and economic explanations by adopting a constitutive perspective on communication to investigate how vulnerability is produced, sustained, and perhaps resisted in supply chains. Inspired by scholarship on the communicative constitution of organizations, we conceptualize supply chains as ongoing accomplishments of communicative practices rather than fixed

structures (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren, 2015; McPhee & Zaug, 2009). In this view, discourses, narratives, reporting mechanisms, and visibility regimes shape who counts as legitimate actors and whose voices are excluded. This lens allows us to unpack how everyday practices, gendered roles and norms, language, and visibility tools both reveal and reproduce communicative systems of control, surveillance, and marginalization.

Such analysis is much needed. The pressures and risks that strain supply chains, such as economic inequities, shifting political relationships, global pandemics, travel bans, wars, and environmental devastations, have made it commonplace for us to hear about supply chain disruptions in the news. And yet, supply chain analysis does not often get attention in communication studies, perhaps because the conditions in which they operate are considered to be material and thus extra-communicative. However, there are several developments in critical communication inquiry that make the study of supply chains not only relevant, but compelling.

First, the material turn in organizational communication and attention to the interlacing of communication and capitalism (Kuhn, 2024) implies that we need to see communication processes as driving forces in supply chains and not as dependent variables; communication analyses, in turn, help move beyond resource-driven views of supply chain management (SCM). Second, we add to critical research on global supply chains demonstrating that vulnerabilities and risks are unevenly distributed across Global North–South production networks, with risks and uncertainty routinely imposed onto workers in the Global South (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019; Bair, 2010; Selwyn, 2018; Tsing, 2009). Within these extractive organizational arrangements, crises are not anomalous events but are normalized through everyday communicative practices. Consequently, workers in the Global South function mainly as "shock absorbers" for supply chain risks, bearing the consequences of frequent disruptions, sustainability demands, and market volatility despite limited voice or control over organizational decisions.

And third, given the deep-rootedness of global crises in our contemporary communication ecology, communication is up front and center both in the production and the resolution of supply chain crises. Three concepts in particular help us place communication in a more constitutive place vis-a-vis contemporary crises in supply chains: fluidity, visibility, and disarticulation.

2.1. Fluidity

Bauman (2000) uses the term "fluidity" to describe the relentless speed of modern society, where everything is constantly changing, and maintaining stability is challenging. Fluidity has been increasingly applied to SCM and related fields. Unlike Bauman's (2000) view of fluidity, SCM research tends to emphasize the ability to coordinate resources across different locations and times, thereby enabling the smooth and efficient flow of goods (Bueno-Solano et al., 2022; Sodhi & Tang, 2021). Such managerial approaches to fluidity tend to overlook social problems caused by the pursuit of efficiency.

The engagement with fluidity in organizational communication studies, however, is broad and comes from empirical research on fluid social collectives (Ganesh, Stohl, & Kim, 2022; Smith, 2022; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015) and inquiry into what constitutes organization itself. Studies of fluidity have explicitly challenged container metaphors for organizations, both dismantling the rigid boundaries between organization/organizing as well as formal organization and formless ones (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Ganesh and Stohl (2021) use fluidity to describe today's organizational communication phenomena in terms

of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, examining fluidity from four perspectives: structures, institutions, agency, and identity. Other recent work (e.g., Kuhn, 2024) invokes process-based ontologies to argue that *all* organizations are "better understood as fluid practices" (p. 39). These multiple views of fluidity have resulted in it turning into an umbrella metaphor for organization in much the same way that the container metaphor itself was (Clegg & Baumeler, 2010).

Cruz and Sodeke (2021) challenge dominant neoliberal views on fluidity, exploring postcolonial fluidity in the organizing efforts of Nigerian street hawkers and Liberian market women. They reframe fluidity as a communicative power site where marginalized organizational actors interact with powerful external forces. We adopt this lens to recognize that pressures to optimize the flow of goods from suppliers to consumers have produced an unbalanced power system that entrenches vulnerability, particularly among factory workers positioned at the lower end. Drawing on workers' everyday experiences of space and time, we examine how this vulnerability materializes.

2.2. Visibility

Visibility in SCM is broadly conceptualized as the extent to which stakeholders can access timely, accurate, and comprehensive information across the entire network, from sourcing and production to distribution and labor conditions (Barratt & Oke, 2007). Visibility is seen as a strategic resource that enables real-time responsiveness, forecasting, risk mitigation, automatic decision-making, and regulatory compliance (Caridi et al., 2014). Visibility in SCM scholarship largely focuses on enhancing logistical efficiencies, improving tracking and tracking mechanisms, and, through timely and accurate exchange of data, reduces information asymmetries (Bartlett et al., 2007; Busse et al., 2017; Kraft & Zheng, 2021; Lee et al., 2014; Somapa et al., 2018). Communication, in this conceptualization of visibility, is assumed to be linear, transmission-focused, and information-based.

Our study draws from scholarship that conceptualizes visibility more broadly, not as neutral or purely informational, but as a deeply political and socially constructed category (Brighenti, 2007, 2010). Visibility is not merely about being seen or unseen; rather, visibility is produced through power relations, institutional structures, and mediated technologies that determine *how* one is seen, who controls visibility, whose voice is heard and diminished, and its socio-political implications.

Brighenti (2007) argues that visibility functions as a social field that enables recognition, control, inclusion, and exclusion. Scholars like Flyverbom (2022), Albu (2019), and Leonardi and Treem (2020) extend this to the digital realm, showing how algorithms and platforms shape architectures of visibility curating what is seen, datafied, and considered governable. Ganesh, Stohl, and James (2022) emphasize that visibility within global organizations is often uneven, with marginalized voices rendered invisible or only made hypervisible in surveillant, tokenistic, or disciplinary ways. Thompson (2005) and Treem et al. (2024) show that while visibility can enable agency and amplify presence, it can also reinforce surveillance, hierarchy, and vulnerability. Across these perspectives, visibility emerges not as a static phenomenon but as a contested terrain where recognition, inclusion, and representation are constantly negotiated.

Therefore, we take the view that visibility serves as a communicative condition shaped by power, institutional structures, and strategic representation. Rather than being neutral or inherently empowering,

visibility can expose workers to surveillance, control, and exclusion, especially in transnational and precarious labor contexts. This perspective reframes visibility as a relational and contested process that often deepens vulnerability.

2.3. Disarticulation

The notion of disarticulation, first expressed in Samir Amin's (1976) work, extends Marx's idea that capitalist expansion necessitates the transformation of use-value into exchange value. That is, human labor is no longer conceived of in terms of its embedded value in local communities: instead, it is temporally abstracted, measured in terms of hours and therefore standardized, and made exchangeable—and so workers are paid hourly or by the volume of output regardless of how important or useful their work might actually be (Marx, 2024). As Amin (1976) argues, work has no local meaning apart from the fact that it involves the procurement of money. Such temporal abstraction and standardization facilitate a hierarchy of labor that distinguishes between various levels of skill, and as Federici (2004) has argued, it is fundamentally gendered and raced because it rests on bodily work even as it dismisses it as a form of labor, or places feminine/feminized or Black labor at the bottom of labor hierarchies.

Disarticulation has been an important concept in commodity chain analysis (Bair & Werner, 2011). It draws attention to the idea that the transformation of use–value into exchange–value involves a separation between workers and communities. In Hall's terms, as subaltern identities are articulated into capitalist systems, i.e., as they are transformed into workers, laborers, or employees (Hall, 1983, as cited in Grossberg, 1986), they are separated from their roles as parents, siblings, children, and citizens. Ganesh et al. (2025) argue that disarticulation is particularly important in Global South contexts because contemporary supply chains "arrange entire countries at the manufacturing peripheries of global capitalism" (p. 355).

We use the term "severance" to draw attention to this communicative feature of disarticulation. While Sayer (2002, p. 25) says that for Marx severance referred to the separation of the conditions of production from the producers (workers) themselves, Cheney (2001, p. 137) refashioned the concept for organizational communication studies to implicate the:

> Severance of people from each other in any authentic sense of community and democracy; severance of control over business from its people—as in the subordination of employees' interests to the concerns of often very distant consumers or investors; and severance of people from "place" in the sense of devalued connections with community, locale and land.

As Ganesh (2018) argues, severance thus implies the vulnerabilization of communities and the transformation of people in place into nodes in networks.

While the concepts of fluidity, visibility, and (less so) disarticulation have been discussed in communication scholarship, they have rarely been mobilized to explain how supply chain relationships organize and intensify worker vulnerability across production contexts. We argue that attending to these concepts as communicative conditions crafts a powerful lens for understanding why precarity persists across diverse settings. While dominant SCM frameworks measure risk through logistics, auditing, and pressure indexes, they fall short of representing workers' lived experiences of vulnerability. Thus, our research question guides

our analysis of three cases to show how vulnerability materializes in practice and shapes the everyday realities of labor in global production networks.

3. Methods

We follow a longstanding analytic tradition in comparative ethnography (Simmons & Smith, 2019) that argues for the value of analyses that make comparisons across multiple ethnographic projects, not necessarily to improve generalizability, but to generate rich global views of communicative processes (e.g., Tracy & Scott, 2006). Our work is based on three cases that differ in geography, social context, and communicative environment in order to demonstrate that the conditions of fluidity, visibility, and disarticulation are global mechanisms that produce worker vulnerability across settings. We use each case to provide a distinct empirical vantage point on one communicative condition, although our analysis also establishes that all three conditions are present across sites.

The three studies were conducted by the authors, each one responsible for fieldwork and initial analysis in their respective contexts. All researchers adhered to institutional review protocols to ensure participant confidentiality, informed consent, and responsible fieldwork practices. Tracy's (2020) framework for qualitative rigor, researcher positionality, and reflexivity was addressed through prolonged immersion in the field, ongoing reflexive memo-writing, and collective sensemaking during joint analysis. All researchers share cultural, contextual, and linguistic proximity with the communities studied. The cases have been drawn from larger, distinct ethnographies of global supply chains. Here, their juxtaposition enables an analysis that foregrounds everyday communicative processes through which supply chains are organized, contested, and experienced by workers across time and space.

The first case is based on a multi-sited ethnography carried out in China between June and August 2025, involving approximately 45 days of fieldwork in Yiwu and Guangzhou, two major hubs for fast-fashion production and trade. This fieldwork included roughly 130 hours of participant and non-participant observation in factories, wholesale markets, garment worker labor markets, workshops, and exhibitions, as well as approximately 80 on-site interviews with factory workers, factory owners, wholesalers, e-commerce retailers, and international buyers. Interviews ranged from 10 minutes to two hours and were supplemented by extensive fieldnotes documenting spatial arrangements, temporal rhythms, and communicative interactions across production and exchange sites.

The second case draws from a multi-year, multi-sited ethnographic project in Maharashtra, India, focused on labor-intensive agricultural supply chains. About 80 interviews across the agricultural supply chain were conducted, of which 20 were with women, each lasting between 15 minutes and one hour. Fieldwork also involved mapping the onion supply chain across winter and summer seasons by tracing the movement of onions from farms to local bazaars. Interviews and observations were conducted at onion farms, wholesale markets of varying scales, traders' warehouses, government research centers, retail markets, and communal spaces. Particular attention was paid to women workers' narrated accounts of their daily routines, labor roles, interactions with traders and farmers, and the challenges produced by unstable markets and the intersection of paid labor with domestic responsibilities.

The third case is derived from a multi-year, multi-sited ethnographic project examining communicative conditions under which sustainability is produced in the global organic cotton garment industry. Fieldwork traced supply chains from designers and retail outlets in the Global North, especially Sweden, to Indian garment factories, spinning mills, and farmer cooperatives involving over 140 interviews and approximately 300 observation hours. The vignette analyzed in this study is based on a daylong visit to a spinning mill supplying organic cotton textiles domestically and internationally. Data for this case included recorded and transcribed interviews with factory managers alongside extended, unrecorded interactions with seven women workers. Detailed fieldnotes were taken during and after these interactions and later compiled and narrativized following established ethnographic conventions (Emerson et al., 2011).

Analysis of interview transcripts, fieldnotes, observational records, and ethnographic vignettes proceeded iteratively and collaboratively, guided by qualitative analytic traditions emphasizing reflexivity, comparison, and theory generation (Charmaz, 2014; Tracy, 2020). The research team first engaged in joint discussions to identify sensitizing concepts and to select analytically rich vignettes from each case. First-person vignettes were developed following guidance from Miles and Huberman (1994) and Tracy (2020) to highlight analytically relevant moments, illustrating how participants described their experiences with crisis while faithfully representing participants' experiences and preserving confidentiality. The vignettes selected and presented in the analysis not only provide rich narrative descriptions but also illuminate broader theoretical concepts.

Open coding was then conducted to identify communicative practices and notable incidents within and across sites (Saldaña, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through axial coding, relationships among codes were explored to examine how communicative processes organized labor conditions, power relations, and experiences of vulnerability. Theoretical coding further integrated these relationships into higher-order analytical categories that cut across cases while remaining grounded in their specific contexts (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

Comparative coding was used throughout the analytic process to identify patterns and contrasts across the three supply chains, enabling the researchers to theorize how different organizational, social, and spatial configurations produce distinct yet related forms of labor vulnerability. This approach allowed for the generation of nuanced, context-sensitive interpretations rooted in lived experience, while also supporting collective theoretical reflection across cases (Tracy, 2020). The following case studies, each narrated in first person, illustrate the communicative conditions of worker vulnerability in practice.

4. Case Study One: Fluidity and Everyday Crisis in Fast-Fashion Production

I met three kinds of workers in the markets, workshops, and factories of Yiwu and Guangzhou: long-term workers, temporary workers, and those who recently started family workshops. Long-term workers typically have annual contracts with factories, work long hours, and are deeply embedded in the production end of fast-fashion supply chains. Conversely, temporary workers move fluidly between factories, deciding when and where to work. Besides large or medium-sized factories, there are family workshops in urban villages, many of whose owners were once factory workers. They are also deeply embedded in the production side of the fast-fashion supply chains but also try to move into the exchange end. Each type of labor is spatiotemporally suspended and constrained differently in the fluid system, which shapes its vulnerability in different ways.

I reached out to Peilin, a 28-year-old engineer born into a family of garment factory workers, facing several hardships. Peilin invited me to his family's home and showed me around nearby factories. A typical day for a long-term worker starts at 8 am at the factory, followed by lunch around 12, either at the dining hall or at home, and then work until 6 pm. After a brief dinner, they return to work and finally can go home after 10 pm. In a month, these workers could take one or two days off. With this routine, they appear to be perpetually present in the factories. However, they were paid by the piece rather than by the hour, which created the impression that their presence was voluntary rather than required.

When I probed this observation, Peilin's aunt explained that she couldn't stop working because her pause would halt the next step in production, affecting her coworkers' livelihoods as each worker is responsible for a specific stage in making the clothing. After completing their tasks, they either bundle or hang the clothing and pass it on to their coworkers, creating pressure to maintain a timely workflow. As Peilin's father said: "When you ask for leave, you still need to find a temporary worker to replace you. The cost of hiring a replacement is more than what you earn if you take time off."

One worker said, "there is no piece rate for working as a long-term worker even though it offers more stability," as she discussed why long-term work is not an option. Garment workers' job markets in Guangzhou emerge and spread across urban villages, mostly located along the streets. A recruiter often brings samples with a cardboard tag listing the unit price and size. Workers assess the difficulty of the piecework and inquire about the factory locations and machine conditions. Using this information, they quickly calculate their daily earnings and negotiate with recruiters. Temporary workers protect their expected piece rate and don't need to work every day. If they make good money from one task, they can take a day or two off and start over for new opportunities.

However, the on-again and off-again job pattern makes it difficult for temporary workers to build strong relationships with their peers, creating very isolating conditions for them. Wang, a typical temporary worker, rents a bed, not even a room, on a daily basis in an urban village of Guangzhou where six workers share a space of less than 10 square feet. The environment is obviously cramped and stuffy, but Wang seemed satisfied with affordable overnight pay (1.50 USD), giving him more flexibility to move from town to town while carrying the garments. Besides this temporary residence, Wang also rents a room in Humen, a city near Guangzhou, where the rent is cheaper. As July is both the off-season for the garment industry and the typhoon season in Guangzhou, causing significant challenges for job seekers like Wang who returned to Humen to rest and explore job opportunities there.

Liu and her husband had just started their family workshop. They had been working in various factories in Guangzhou for about 15 years, starting in their 20s. Liu invited me to dinner in their one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment with four sewing machines and household items occupying the living room. The couple works and eats in the living room. During the summer holiday, their two children visit from their hometown, suggesting that they also engage in childcare during working hours. When I visited, their 14-year-old boy was scrolling through his phone in the bedroom with two bunk beds, while the 5-year-old child was attached to his mom. Liu's husband was carrying a bag of clothing samples from wholesalers they have known for years. This meant they would need to work from morning to night over the next two days to complete the order and only then spend one day at amusement parks with their children. According to Liu, the key factor that enabled them to start their business was their familiarity with many nearby wholesalers

and factory owners, who could get them relatively stable orders. For large orders, they also recruited temporary workers from job markets to help. Many family workshops begin their operations in this manner. The couple shared that they are now planning to rent a floor to expand their business.

From the daily spatiotemporal experiences of garment workers, these examples show how fluidity as a communicative power site (Cruz & Sodeke, 2021) leads to their vulnerability in three ways. The fluid labor systems within factories transform long-term factory workers into processual objects, resulting in spatiotemporal "pressure" to be constantly present in factories for higher earnings and to keep pace with their peers' ongoing work. In the process of seeking a good piece rate, temporary workers are caught in on-again off-again job patterns, which communicatively "isolates" them and makes their work lives nomadic, preventing them from forming deep, lasting relationships. Family workshop startups experience the "collapse" of boundaries between their workspaces and homes, as well as between work and care time.

5. Case Study Two: Visibility, Gendered Labor, and Vulnerability in the Onion Supply Chain

Onions, a common pantry item, have gained notoriety in India due to their susceptibility to such supply chain crises as extreme price fluctuations, market vagaries, and loss of produce. Onion production, supply, and distribution are often fraught with political controversy, public uproar, and farmers' despair over unstable prices. The core onion supply chain typically comprises actors such as farmers, traders, large wholesale government-supported markets, laborers, women workers, and various government regulatory agencies. Interviews with most major supply chain actors acknowledged the critical role women played in the chain. However, despite their presence in occupational arenas, women workers remain invisible, on the peripheries of the chain, and are considered highly vulnerable actors.

Women workers are exposed to multiple contingencies stemming from a variety of supply chain issues and do not typically have the agency and access to resources to adequately manage the risks affecting their livelihood. While onion producers are the most adversely affected actors during extreme weather conditions and the resulting market uncertainty, women workers also face the brunt due to their dependency on either farmers or traders for their daily wages. Thus, for women workers, vulnerability is built into their everyday experiences and is defined by three key aspects that interplay with their visibility and invisibility in supply chains—their positionality, sequestration, and precarity.

First, women workers are positioned on the outer peripheries of the chain. Workers have multiple points of engagement in the chain; however, due to the highly gendered division of labor, they are confined to specific spaces. For instance, women workers perform diverse essential tasks at the production level and post-harvesting activities such as picking onions, cleaning, sorting, and packing. Many women also work at warehouses, shed-like structures built to store harvested onions. There, they grade, sort, and pack onions based on their freshness, color, size, and type. Some women stay home to take care of young children but link themselves indirectly to the chain by participating in the sewing economy and earn piece rate wages for stitching gunny bags used for packaging onions. Thus, women uphold and balance multiple occupational identities as homemakers, farmers, laborers, and workers.

In spite of their pervasive yet peripheral presence, women are absent from influential auction spaces. Onions are auctioned on a massive scale in wholesale markets; farmers bring in onions in batches of hundreds of pounds at a time in pick-up trucks to the wholesale market. Traders then place bids on each truck as the market officials facilitate and oversee the auction process. While observing the auctions, I noticed that women were noticeably excluded. Later on farms, when I asked why they didn't participate in auctions, most workers said, "No, no, women don't go to the markets or auctions, our husbands take the onions in tractors. We take care of the house and do all the farm work." When I further probed about their absence in the auction and why they do not directly conduct business with traders, the women reiterated:

> We don't have the time for that. As soon as we are done with household chores, we immediately get started with the farm chores and continue with that until evening, so there is no time to go to the market. This is our job, on the farm.

In some large auctions, women were marginally present, as laborers who helped farmers reload their trucks, but were absent from the auction itself. These positions and roles were solidified in the chain, and the women seemed to have disciplined themselves to operate with these gendered divisions that resulted in the devaluation of their labor.

Second, women workers faced vulnerability due to the constantly looming threat of sequestration from the chain. One worker said, "Most of us don't own agricultural land. I care for and work on other people's farms or toil as laborers at traders' warehouses with nothing to show for ourselves." As seasons altered, so did the nature of the work, which temporarily severed their connection with the chain, as they took up work on soybean or grape farms, or even foraged for fruit and berries to be able to eat.

The roles occupied by women workers within the chain are thus seasonal, temporary, and unstable, fluctuating in response to regional patterns of agricultural production, shifting labor demands, and changing market conditions. This spatial sequestration is characterized by direct disconnection from critical spaces of the supply chain, such as the auction markets, warehouses, farms, and government offices. To avoid the risk of losing connection to the supply chain, some women opted for another form of employment—sewing gunny bags at home as a fallback option to use their time productively, contribute to their household income, and support their children's educational needs. As one worker said, "It's not much; we can hardly buy sufficient groceries to sustain two people with the money. But it's better than doing nothing all day."

Third, due to their tenuous and enclosed positions, women workers often found themselves on the precarious thresholds of the supply chain. Their participation in the chain is dependent on external contingencies, as one woman working on a farm said:

> See that woman over there, her leg is cramped and swollen, and despite that, she is here. If we don't work today, there's no food tomorrow. We are planting these delicate saplings by hand, carefully one at a time; there's no machine for that. After all this hard work, if the crop gets damaged due to unseasonal hail, then it's a disaster for the farmer. We won't get more jobs if the onion production is low. But when the farmer gets a good price in the market, they are able to help us out and pay us more.

The participation of women throughout the chain underscores the criticality of their active engagement, which at the same time is considered disposable labor. Their presence in the chain grants them the opportunity to earn an additional income for their families, but this presence does not guarantee agency. They are "present" but on the terms of the other actors that employ them. Their precarity is especially compounded during times of environmental and socio-political upheavals in the supply chain as women workers get limited attention in policies and programs. Even if any such programs crafted specifically for women workers did exist, they were unaware of them and lacked access to information and resources.

Brighenti (2010) notes that being visible does not guarantee recognition, which involves being seen as legitimate and valuable. Despite being supply chain actors, because of their positionality on the margins, susceptibility for sequestration, and inherent precarity of their identities, women workers are not bestowed the same degree of legitimacy, officiality, and credence that other actors receive, with rarely any scope for upskilling their positions in the chain.

6. Case Study Three: Disarticulation and Severance in Garment Chains

We walk past huge bales of ginned cotton stored neatly along the warehouse wall of this large spinning mill in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and as we leave, I pause by the door to see the names and photos of workers on various committees. We know that over 90% of all workers in the factory are female, so I am not surprised to see that the committees are entirely composed of women. But I note the last names: Sharma, Nag, Mandagi, Jakaki, Jakaki ("Again? They must be sisters," I think) and realize that none of them are Tamil.

A while later, we are at the factory director's office, and we reiterate our request to engage with workers. Seven women are ushered into the room by a floor manager, and we are offered the opportunity to speak with them and ask them about their work. The HR manager and the director are, of course, present, so Kashi and I have to tread carefully, and the conversation is somewhat stilted in the beginning. Queries about whether they like their job are out of the question. I begin with a very standard: "Where are you from?" "Orissa" and "Andhra" are the only two responses. How long have you been working there, I continue: between two to five years. Covid, they say, was difficult as they could not go home, but the factory managers were kind and kept them employed. In trying to get them to say something about the quality of their lives, I ask: "Would you bring your families here to work with you?" One says no, a few say maybe, and one, who I discover later is one of the women named Jakaki, says she already did. It is not uncommon, we discover later, for people to bring a younger sibling to the factory for work a year or two after they begin. All of them send money back to their villages and they miss where they lived. They enjoy going out for movies together once or twice a month on the single day that they get off from work every week. Their only friends are other workers in the factory. The factory houses them in a large three-storey hostel behind the factory. I ask them how they like it there. "We like it a lot," they say, as their managers look at them. "It is safe," say others. They all work shifts of between 9 to 10 hours a day, six days a week, staggered depending upon the volume of work and the urgency of the orders.

The managers also talk with us about the working conditions. They tell us that the vast majority of the women are from outside the state; that some of them are Dalit and others are Adivasi, or tribal women. They run regular health camps for their workers, and in line with several of their buyers, provide wages that meet living wage standards. After our meeting, we walk back to the hostel behind the factory. The building is surrounded

by a concrete wall, about eight feet high, and the gate that we enter is solid, with a gigantic old lock on the outside (why the outside, not the inside, I wonder). We enter the very clean and well-swept compound and look up at the building. Several eyes peer cautiously back at us through the dormitory windows—some smiles, of course, for Kashi, but I note the reserved expressions. We turn left and go into the dining hall, where we are served lunch: simple, tasty, and spicy vegetarian Tamil food. I notice a few pictures of Hindu deities on the wall. I ask how old the women are: about 18 to 25–26 for the most part. How long do they work there? A few years, and then they go back to their villages and get married. When we inquire as to why local workers do not work at the factory, the answer from the manager is—they do, but there are not many of them, and the women who come in from other states need the work more.

It is common for garment factories across Tamil Nadu to hire women from elsewhere, and a large number of them come from relatively faraway states like Orissa as well as the closer neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh. More broadly, the migration of women from one part of the country to urban centers across the south to take on manual labor, domestic work, factory work, and sometimes sex work, indexes the vulnerabilities in their lives that cause them to leave: economic hardships and perilously low wages, the failure of male figures in their lives, and gender and caste-based violence. But what our experience in the factory revealed was that the act of moving away for the women could itself inaugurate new forms of vulnerability in the form of "multi-layered" severance: a quasi-forced separation from family and community ties, as well as sequestration from the ebb and flow of everyday life outside the factory.

This severance is not only multi-layered, but it is also "surveillant." While the factory was in many senses being responsible by enforcing strict curfews, ensuring women did not go out alone and returned on time, everyday life was consequently overdetermined by the factory in a manner akin to a total institution where everything from their salaries, demanding work schedules, friendships, food, and culture was managed by the factory. The issue of food also reflects how Brahmanical customs such as vegetarianism can pervade collective life: while several of the women (notably Dalit or Adivasi) likely ate meat at home when they could afford to do so, the default common denominator at the hostel was local, vegetarian, South Indian food. The presence of Hindu deities on the walls of the cafeteria, while designed to help women feel at home, also reinforced the centrality of Hindu culture and served to marginalize Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim identities.

Severance is also "affective": We were told that while women could not carry their mobile phones into the factory, all of them, without exception, had one. It was clear that women at the factory certainly called and texted their families every day, perhaps more than they ordinarily would. Their physical separation from their homes was a kind of emotional deprivation that made itself evident even in the muted comments we heard from women in the somewhat staged focus group. The separation from the family was also accompanied by a paradoxical increase in the responsibility to the family itself: Several women told us that they were the primary breadwinners in the family and they sent the entirety of their paychecks back home. Affective bonds, feelings of responsibility, and an obvious sense of loneliness thus set an underlying emotional tone for the worker. Even as management set up regular social events, competitions, and celebrations in order to keep morale up, the fact that morale needed to be kept up was telling. This multilayered, surveillant, and affective severance was the communicative foundation upon which disarticulation was made possible.

7. Analysis and Discussion

Our accounts shed light on multiple kinds of worker vulnerabilities, including gender, impoverishment, overwork, isolation, financial precarity, physical and mental health and wellbeing issues, and workplace hazards. What we have shown, however, is that vulnerability is shaped and conditioned by the larger communication environment in which workers operate, namely fluidity, visibility, and disarticulation, which transcend individual workplace dynamics and constraints.

Across the three cases, fluidity, visibility, and disarticulation take on different analytic weights. In the fast-fashion garment chain, fluidity is salient through rapid spatiotemporal reorganization of labor; in the agricultural onion chain, visibility and recognition of women's work are uneven; and in the organic cotton chain, disarticulation is evident through severance in the enforced separation of workers' productive and social lives. Analytically, this variation shows that worker vulnerability is engendered through varying configurations of communicative conditions that are contextually amplified and often overlapping. These cases together demonstrate that supply chain vulnerability is best understood as a relational and communicatively constituted process, one that endures across industries and national contexts.

It may be evident to the reader that elements of one case can be found in another: For instance, the lives of women in the agricultural chain had clear elements of fluidity as well as visibility. The workers in the garment factory were also rendered visible through surveillance even as they experienced severance. And workers in China who experienced fluidity also had been severed from their families and communities. The sequestration that women in the onion supply chain experienced was an inversion of the severance that mill workers experienced, but both underscore the pivotal role of the chain in creating boundaries of inclusion and separation. Below, we summarize what our studies reveal about the nature of vulnerabilities in these three communicative conditions across all three cases.

First, fluidity, as a foundational feature of fast fashion that emphasizes the efficient flow of goods from suppliers to consumers, clearly leads to the vulnerability of laborers at the upstream, production end of supply chains. This is particularly the case in terms of their pressures of having "9–9–6" jobs that kept them constantly at work for 72 hours a week. It was also evident in their isolation that stemmed from their on-again, off-again work experiences; a phenomenon echoed in the other two cases as well. And finally, fluidity was clear in how boundaries were collapsing for workers between workplaces and homes, as well as between work and care time.

While visibility in the form of real-time tracking of the movement of commodities is a critical feature of SCM, it is not merely about charting data points. Rather, visibility influences whose appearance is validated and who is muted, thus playing a powerful role in shaping the vulnerability of actors. Women workers and laborers occupy a paradoxical position; they are visible enough to signal their ongoing participation and yet they remain structurally absent in the high-value spaces of the chain, leaving them present at the margins but invisible where it matters the most. This, in turn, makes workers vulnerable to involuntary sequestration. Because they occupy peripheral spaces, supply chain contingencies compel workers to separate from the chain, further contributing to their invisibility, underscoring the precarity that workers face. As a result of their vulnerable positions, women workers rarely attain recognition and influence that could make a legitimate and visible difference in their lives.

Disarticulation is a constitutive feature of supply chains, and we focused upon the notion of severance to draw attention to the performance of work and labor itself to find that severance, for migratory workers in particular, was multilayered, encompassing both separation from home as well as separation from the environment in which they currently lived. Severance was, moreover, surveillant, with every aspect of workers' lives and identities managed. And severance was also affective in the sense that it was emotionally fraught: Workers were racked with homesickness even as they experienced feeling responsible for those people they had left behind in the form of sending home money and participating vicariously in their families with their smartphones.

These features of the communication environment—fluidity, visibility, and disarticulation—also have implications for how we understand the contemporary crisis, and we identify three kinds of crises evident in each case. First, contemporary environmental crises are deeply textured by the fluid conditions of contemporary capitalism (Bauman, 2000; Kuhn, 2024). In the case of the fast-fashion industry, the Zara model adopted by now mammoth platforms like Shein and Temu has sped the industry up into an "ultra-fast" stage (Camargo et al., 2020). The relentless pursuit of rapid design, small-order production, and turnaround leads to significant environmental waste, including excessive water and chemical use, waste, and CO_2 emissions (Niinimäki et al., 2020). In the same vein as Sassen (2014), who more than a decade ago argued that systemic complexity produced brutality, here we show that systemic liquidity produces vulnerability.

Visibility regimes accentuate impending political crises as well as economic ones (Brighenti, 2010). Unstable trade policies such as abrupt tariff changes, export bans, or shifting trade alliances create cascading disruptions that disproportionately impact marginalized workers positioned at the fringes of supply chains. For instance, in 2023–2024, the Indian government banned onion exports to curb domestic inflation, resulting in severe losses for farmers who faced plummeting prices, unsold stock, and restricted access to international markets (Tirodkar, 2023, 2024). Such regulatory changes led to political blame games, resulting in widespread wage disruptions for agricultural laborers, particularly women. Rather than protecting precariously positioned workers, extreme policy fluctuations underpinned by political upheaval can exacerbate their invisibility in the chain and consequently, add to their vulnerability.

Finally, disarticulation and the severance of workers from each other and their communities contribute to a third kind of crisis: the fragmentation of civic and cultural life. This is evident not only in the case discussed here, but it is also evident when age-old modes of craft production crumble in the face of industrial modes of production. Across the global south, as traditional connections have broken down, they have not been replaced with what scholars like Daniel Lerner or Wilbur Schramm referred to as the onset of a more rational and cosmopolitan system; instead, they have resulted in the fragmentation of communities and cultures. Without romanticizing traditional systems and modes of craft production (which in the case of India are deeply inflected with caste and patronage; see Shekar & Nandurkar, in press), it is still clear that global supply chains fragment societies precisely because they are global.

By theorizing fluidity, visibility, and severance as communicative conditions, this study challenges logistics-centered SCM frameworks by revealing how supply chains actively constitute labor vulnerability through everyday discursive and relational practices that structure how workers are moved, seen, and displaced. This reframing challenges dominant SCM models that separate the "social" and "operational" domains of supply chains and treat vulnerability as a logistical by-product, instead revealing it as

communicatively produced risks that accumulate across sites and societies. In doing so, the study offers a new lens for understanding crisis as a cumulative set of communicative arrangements that normalize vulnerabilities and obscure its human costs.

Our study suggests that industry leaders should incorporate relational and communicative indicators such as worker turnover, displacement, and migration patterns into risk assessments and attend to the social, political, historical, and communal crisis contexts that sustain hidden forms of precarity in supply chains. Leaders should evaluate how production schedules, living arrangements, and factory geographies sever workers from family and community, and should treat social disconnection as a material risk factor and not as a natural condition. Practical interventions require redesigning the communicative processes so that, even within today's backdrop of perpetual crisis, workers' vulnerability is not treated as an inevitable outcome. Creating space for long-term relationship-building with workers, cooperatives, and local communities and strengthening independent worker voice is essential for equitable supply chain relationships.

8. Conclusion

While the three cases offer detailed and situated insights into how vulnerability is communicatively conditioned, it remains limited by access constraints, researcher positionality, time-boundedness, and the localized nature of observations. A lot more remains to be done about tracing the shape of contemporary forms of vulnerability. Future research should continue to use longitudinal and comparative ethnographic approaches to provide more comprehensive and nuanced understandings of multiple forms of worker vulnerability.

Our study assists with this important project by putting forth three communicative conditions that engender worker vulnerability in supply chains—fluidity, visibility, and disarticulation. The fluidity of supply chains, augmented by volatile market demands, ceaseless working hours, and an ever-changing subcontracting network, fragments accountability and obscures labor conditions. Workers face severance from home and families, coupled with selective visibility that produces compliance while concealing exploitation, and distorted inclusion in occupational spaces in supply chains. These circumstances amplify the vulnerability of marginalized workers who remain structurally invisible yet essential to production. We have also shown that multi-sited, comparative ethnographic approaches to studying labor in supply chains offer an immersive and context-rich insight into workers' lived experiences, revealing how vulnerabilities are negotiated in everyday practices, the situated meanings, informal arrangements, and affective dimensions of labor to show that vulnerability is not only experienced but communicatively constituted through interactions and exclusions.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Mistra Environmental Communication Program. We gratefully acknowledge this support.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Texas at Austin and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that supports the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the need to protect the confidentiality of the research participants.

LLMs Disclosure

No large language model (LLM) tools were used in the research, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

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