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ADVANCING THE STUDY OF ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION AND INEQUALITY: INTRODUCING A NEW SCHOLARLY FORUM

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Advancing the Study of Economic Exploitation and Inequality: Introducing a New Scholarly Forum

Abstract
This study evaluates ten priority research areas for advancing understanding of economic exploitation and inequality, encompassing conceptual and methodological challenges, technological transformations, labour market developments, structural disadvantages, institutional arrangements and the effectiveness of policy interventions. It introduces the Journal of Economic Exploitation and Inequality (JOEEI) as an international scholarly forum committed to addressing these challenges through theoretical, empirical and interdisciplinary inquiry. Drawing on diverse traditions of economic thought, the editorial examines the relationships between exploitation, inequality, economic power and institutional practices, emphasising the importance of conceptual clarity, methodological rigour and intellectual pluralism. It also reviews the six articles published in the inaugural issue, considering their contributions to contemporary debates and their connections to the journal's wider research agenda. The discussion highlights how structural conditions, institutional arrangements and individual behaviour may shape exploitative relationships and unequal economic outcomes across different contexts. Particular attention is given to identifying underlying mechanisms, recognising differences between manifestations of exploitation and critically assessing institutional and policy responses. By establishing a dedicated platform for international collaboration and engagement with competing perspectives, JOEEI seeks to advance scholarly understanding, encourage methodological innovation and inform evidence-based discussions concerning economic exploitation, inequality and social justice.

Keywords: Economic exploitation; Economic inequality; Pluralism; Interdisciplinary research; Economic justice.
Jel classifications: A12, B41, B52, D63, J47, J81.

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1. Introduction

Economic exploitation and inequality remain persistent features of contemporary economic systems, despite substantial advances in economic growth (Drydakis, 2026a; Milanovic, 2016; Smith, 2016; Piketty, 2014). Across countries and sectors, disparities in income, wealth, opportunities and economic power coexist with wage suppression, precarious employment, exploitative business practices and unequal relationships between workers, employers and other economic actors (Drydakis, 2026a; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2024; Pinnington et al., 2023). These problems reflect contemporary economic arrangements alongside historical processes, institutional structures and social relationships that shape the distribution of resources and opportunities (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2016; Piketty, 2014). Understanding their persistence therefore requires attention to both their observable manifestations and the conditions through which they arise and are sustained (Drydakis and Martell, 2026).

The establishment of the Journal of Economic Exploitation and Inequality (JOEEI) responds to the need for a dedicated academic forum in which these issues can be investigated through rigorous theoretical and empirical research. Although closely related, exploitation and inequality are distinct phenomena. Inequality concerns differences in the distribution of resources, opportunities and economic outcomes, whereas exploitation directs attention to relationships, practices and arrangements through which some individuals or groups benefit unfairly at the expense of others (Drydakis and Martell, 2026; Drydakis, 2023; Piketty, 2014; Reiff, 2013; Holmström, 1997; Hill, 1994). A further distinction concerns inequity, which refers to inequalities that are unjust, avoidable or rooted in structural disadvantage (Milanovic, 2016; Bourguignon, 2015; Darity, 2005). Existing disparities may create circumstances that facilitate exploitation, while exploitative practices can reinforce economic and social inequalities (Fraser, 2016; Veneziani, 2013; Roemer, 1982). Examining these relationships without presupposing their nature or direction is fundamental to the journal's intellectual purpose. The significance of this inquiry is evident in contemporary labour markets, where modern slavery, human trafficking and informal employment persist alongside expanding global markets and technological development (Drydakis, 2026a; Drydakis and Martell, 2026; Wood et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2017). Although these practices differ in severity, organisation and legal status, they frequently occur in circumstances characterised by limited employment alternatives and inadequate protection (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024; Pinnington et al., 2023; International Labour Organization, 2022). Their persistence raises questions about whether economic growth and the formal recognition of labour rights necessarily produce improvements in working conditions or reduce exploitation (Drydakis and Martell, 2026; Lawal, 2026).

Changes in the organisation of work have introduced additional challenges. Temporary employment, digital labour platforms and the gig economy have expanded opportunities for economic participation while generating concerns about insecurity and access to social protection (Drydakis, 2026a; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2024; World Bank, 2023; Kalleberg, 2018; Standing, 2011). Algorithmic management and workplace surveillance can further alter employment relationships by enabling organisations to monitor performance, allocate tasks and determine remuneration through systems that workers may have limited capacity to understand or challenge (Cini, 2023; Lata et al., 2023; Pignot, 2023; Wood et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2018; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). Such arrangements raise concerns about the distribution of economic risks between employers and employees (Lata et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2017; van Doorn, 2017), suggesting that technological innovation may change the mechanisms through which unequal relationships are organised without necessarily eliminating them (Drydakis and Martell, 2026).

These developments intersect with longstanding patterns of social disadvantage. Women, migrants, racialised communities, individuals with disabilities, sexual orientation and gender identity minorities, and other marginalised populations may face distinct and overlapping barriers to secure employment and institutional protection (Drydakis and Martell, 2026; Drydakis, 2023; International Labour Organization, 2023; Sidiropoulou et al., 2020; Darity et al., 2018). Gendered divisions of paid and unpaid work, discriminatory employment practices, migration restrictions and unequal access to productive resources can reinforce economic dependency and constrain opportunities for advancement (Degani, 2022; Anitha, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2020). These disadvantages may increase exposure to exploitative practices while limiting the capacity of affected groups to challenge them

(Giousmpasoglou et al., 2024; van Doorn, 2017; Standing, 2011). Their varied experiences also underline the relevance of historical, institutional and social contexts in explaining economic vulnerability (Drydakis and Martell, 2026; Lawal, 2026).

International production and resource extraction introduce further dimensions. Global supply chains operate across countries with differing labour standards and regulatory capacities, often making responsibility for working conditions difficult to establish and enforce (Baglioni et al., 2022; LeBaron, 2014; LeBaron and Lister, 2021). Pressures to reduce production costs can transfer economic risks towards workers and communities with limited institutional protection (Hickel et al., 2022; Dunlap, 2020; Sovacool et al., 2019). Environmental exploitation raises related concerns when resource extraction and industrial development impose social and ecological costs on Indigenous Peoples, rural populations and economically disadvantaged regions (Urzedo and Chatterjee, 2022; Büscher and Fletcher, 2020; Gilberthorpe and Rajak, 2016). These processes also reflect historical inequalities and the continuing influence of colonial economic relationships (Drydakis and Martell, 2026; Hickel et al., 2022; Zajontz, 2022). The range of these experiences indicates that exploitation cannot be adequately examined through isolated incidents of misconduct or unequal economic outcomes alone (Zuboff, 2023; Selwyn, 2018; Veneziani, 2013). Its manifestations may involve interactions between labour markets, business practices, legal systems, technological developments and historical conditions (Baglioni et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2019; Mezzadri, 2016). This does not imply that all forms share identical causes or require uniform responses. Legal classifications and institutional practices may contribute to vulnerability in some circumstances, while the characteristics and conduct of individuals exercising authority may be particularly relevant in others (Boddy and Paraskevopoulou, 2026; Lawal, 2026). Identifying these mechanisms is essential for explaining differences in economic experiences and evaluating the potential consequences of institutional change.

At the heart of JOEEI is the conviction that economic exploitation cannot be adequately understood through a single theoretical perspective or research method. Different schools of economic thought offer distinct explanations of its origins, its relationship with inequality and the influence of economic institutions on the distribution of benefits and disadvantages. The journal therefore welcomes contributions informed by Neoclassical, Institutional, Keynesian, Sraffian, Marxian, Behavioural and Stratification Economics, alongside Feminist, Queer and broader Socio-Economic approaches. It also encourages engagement with business and management studies, sociology, psychology, political science, law, ethics and philosophy. This intellectual openness seeks to promote critical examination of competing assumptions and explanations while maintaining high standards of theoretical clarity and empirical rigour. Methodological diversity is equally important to the journal's orientation. JOEEI welcomes theoretical models, quantitative and qualitative investigations, experiments, surveys, comparative studies, case analyses, systematic literature reviews and research combining multiple methods. Particular attention is given to developing approaches for identifying, analysing and measuring exploitation, which may take forms that conventional indicators of income or wealth inequality cannot fully capture. Institutional assessment tools, for example, can translate theoretical concepts into observable features of organisational practice. Researchers are encouraged to make their assumptions explicit, recognise the limitations of their methods and evaluate evidence in relation to the economic and institutional circumstances being investigated.

The journal's research agenda extends across labour markets, corporate practices, social welfare systems and the roles of community, educational, familial, cultural, religious, business and financial institutions. These organisations and arrangements can influence economic opportunities, bargaining power and access to protection, although their effects may vary according to their internal characteristics and wider social conditions. JOEEI seeks to encourage investigation of how such institutions may mitigate exploitation or contribute to its persistence. Broadening participation in economic scholarship is another important objective. Contributions from researchers working in the Global South, early-career scholars and historically underrepresented communities are particularly encouraged. The purpose is to strengthen academic inquiry by incorporating experiences, research questions and interpretations that may receive insufficient attention in established debates. The journal also recognises the value of Indigenous knowledge, feminist scholarship and approaches examining the continuing influence of colonial histories on economic institutions and academic research. These perspectives can extend understanding of

economic and social relationships and reveal issues that conventional analytical approaches may overlook.

Building on these commitments, JOEEI identifies ten priority research agendas addressing unresolved questions concerning economic exploitation and inequality. As presented in Table 1, they encompass conceptual and methodological challenges, emerging risks associated with technological and labour market transformations, persistent structural and institutional inequalities, and the evaluation of potential policy responses. Each priority identifies a substantive economic problem that warrants further theoretical development, empirical investigation and interdisciplinary inquiry. These priorities are illustrative, not exhaustive, and are intended to encourage critical examination without privileging particular theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches or predetermined conclusions. Through this agenda, the editorial seeks to connect conceptual and methodological developments with empirical investigations of economic power, institutional responsibility and the diverse mechanisms through which exploitation and inequality arise and persist. The international orientation of JOEEI is integral to these objectives. Economic exploitation and inequality occur across diverse institutional settings, with their manifestations and consequences varying between countries, industries and historical periods. Comparative research offers opportunities to identify recurring mechanisms while accounting for differences in development patterns, legal systems and social relationships. The journal seeks to promote scholarly exchange among researchers studying advanced, emerging and developing economies, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of economic conditions across geographical contexts.

[Table 1]

JOEEI's objectives are also connected to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly poverty reduction (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) (United Nations, 2025). This connection reflects the potential for rigorous scholarship to inform public understanding, institutional responsibilities and policy development. The relationship between research on exploitation and these wider objectives is also reflected in the development of a pluralistic analytical framework and its application to modern slavery governance. JOEEI therefore aims to support studies that identify economic problems, examine their underlying causes and critically assess potential responses and their social consequences, while remaining open to findings that challenge established assumptions and policy expectations.

The intellectual foundations of JOEEI are also closely connected to my experience of teaching economics. In 2016, I developed two courses at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge: The Economics of Inequality, Discrimination, Poverty and Exploitation and The Economics of Growth and Development. Both courses were designed to encourage students to explore economic and social problems through different theoretical perspectives, examine the role of institutions and power relations, appreciate the significance of historical and social contexts, and critically assess the evidence supporting economic arguments. They also aimed to connect economic analysis with broader questions of fairness, social responsibility and the possibilities for meaningful change. The principles guiding these courses later formed the basis of what I came to describe as the Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Socioeconomic Phenomena (Drydakis, 2026b), which has been used to train PhD candidates and early career researchers at the Royal Economic Society. Ten years after their introduction into my teaching, these principles continue to inform the intellectual orientation of JOEEI (Drydakis, 2026a; c; Drydakis and Martell, 2026). In 2024, Emerald approached me to discuss a business case for a new academic journal dedicated to the study of economic exploitation. This initiative led to the establishment of JOEEI in 2025 and the publication of its inaugural issue in 2026. The opportunity to develop and lead the journal as its founding Editor-in-Chief has enabled me to extend an intellectual commitment that began in the classroom to a wider international scholarly community.

I wish to dedicate this new journal to my students at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, who attended my courses between 2016 and 2026. Their engagement with questions of economic inequality, exploitation, poverty and development has been an important part of the intellectual journey that led to the journal's establishment. My hope is that these courses have contributed meaningfully to their intellectual development, critical thinking and understanding of economic and social responsibility,

and that the knowledge and perspectives gained through their studies will continue to inform their contributions to society and to the development of more just and inclusive communities.

2. Exploring Economic Exploitation and Inequality Through Diverse Perspectives

The six articles in the inaugural issue of JOEEI examine economic exploitation and inequality through different theoretical, methodological and empirical approaches. Their subjects range from the conceptual foundations of exploitation and institutional responses to modern slavery to financial exclusion, gender disparities, precarious employment and the behaviour of individuals occupying positions of authority. This diversity reflects the complexity of the field and the need to consider how economic structures, institutional arrangements and individual decisions influence social and economic outcomes. The contributions also raise questions about the mechanisms underlying observed inequalities, the effectiveness of existing protections and the conditions under which economic participation may lead to meaningful improvements in people's lives.

Drydakis and Martell (2026) provide a theoretical starting point by examining how economic exploitation is conceptualised and investigated across different intellectual traditions. Their review distinguishes approaches that explain exploitative outcomes through market imperfections, unequal bargaining conditions and regulatory failures from those that regard exploitation as a structural feature of economic and social relationships. Neoclassical Economics generally emphasises market power, information asymmetries and deviations from competitive conditions, whereas Marxian Economics focuses on the appropriation of surplus labour, class relations and capital accumulation. Institutional Economics considers how property rights, labour regulations and social norms influence the distribution of economic power. The review also incorporates Feminist, Stratification, Queer, Postcolonial and Decolonial scholarship, extending the analysis to unpaid care and domestic labour, discrimination, persistent group-based inequalities, institutional exclusion and the continuing effects of colonial histories. Emerging concerns involving digital labour platforms, algorithmic management, global supply chains and environmental resource extraction further demonstrate the range of circumstances in which exploitation may occur. These perspectives reveal how theoretical assumptions influence the identification of economic problems, the interpretation of evidence and the policy responses considered appropriate.

Building on this synthesis, Drydakis and Martell (2026) introduce the Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation, organised around six interconnected principles. These address economic structures and relationships, theoretical and epistemological diversity, overlapping forms of disadvantage, justice and equity, pluralism, and the relationship between research, policy and practice. The framework provides a systematic basis for examining the assumptions, strengths and limitations of alternative approaches without imposing a universal measure of exploitation or seeking to resolve all theoretical disagreements. Its application is illustrated through an empirical investigation of adverse working conditions among immigrants in European countries, including employment without written contracts, wages below statutory minimum levels, and workplace insults or threats. By considering associations between these experiences, physical health and depression, the example demonstrates how measurable employment disadvantages can be examined in relation to wider social and economic conditions. It also illustrates the importance of distinguishing observed associations from established causal relationships. The study's principal contribution is conceptual and methodological, offering researchers a structured approach to developing questions, selecting analytical methods and interpreting evidence. It further identifies opportunities for combining quantitative, qualitative, historical and community-based research to investigate how economic power, employment conditions and social disadvantage interact.

The relationship between conceptual understandings of exploitation and their practical application is developed further by Drydakis (2026a), who examines how British universities address modern slavery through their governance structures and operational practices. Universities occupy a distinctive position as employers and major purchasers of goods and services, participating in supply chains where risks of labour exploitation may arise. Their educational, research and public responsibilities also create expectations extending beyond those ordinarily associated with commercial organisations. The study investigates whether commitments to combating modern slavery influence institutional conduct or remain primarily associated with regulatory compliance and public reporting. Existing research on corporate

responsibility and transparency legislation identifies a persistent gap between formal policy adoption and evidence of effectiveness. Although reporting requirements have increased organisational attention to exploitation risks, greater disclosure has not consistently produced improvements in working conditions, accessible remedies or procurement practices. Studies of the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 and international regulatory initiatives similarly suggest that outcomes depend on enforcement, labour protections and organisational capacity.

Within higher education, previous studies have concentrated largely on published Modern Slavery Statements, leaving less understood about how universities allocate responsibilities, make decisions and implement their commitments. Drydakis (2026a) addresses this gap by examining the perspectives of officers involved in procurement, governance, compliance and related institutional functions. Drawing on the Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation, the study introduces the Modern Slavery Reflexive Assessment Scale, a sixty-item instrument covering governance, operational practices, knowledge, participation and accountability. Evidence collected in 2025 indicates that all participating institutions had written anti-slavery commitments, with the average assessment score suggesting an established level of institutional engagement. However, differences between formal commitments and their practical implementation suggest that published statements alone may not adequately reflect how universities address modern slavery. To interpret these findings, Drydakis (2026a) develops the Reflexive Anti-Slavery Governance Model for Higher Education, comprising five interconnected dimensions: compliance, integration into organisational practices, inclusion of diverse knowledge and participation, continuous learning, and accountability for meaningful change. The model emphasises their interdependence without assuming a fixed sequence of institutional progression. Its contribution lies in connecting debates on exploitation and organisational responsibility to measurable aspects of university governance and identifying areas where existing practices may require improvement.

Questions concerning the difference between formal access and substantive economic improvement also arise in Ozili's (2026) examination of financial inclusion. Revisiting the concept of the bottom of the pyramid (BOP), the study develops a theory explaining how financially excluded populations may influence the provision of financial services and use them to improve their economic position. Earlier development and business scholarship regarded low-income populations as underserved consumer markets capable of generating commercial opportunities alongside poverty reduction. Critics questioned whether extending financial and commercial activities to poorer communities would improve living standards without corresponding increases in income and economic opportunity. Research on financial inclusion has identified positive associations with entrepreneurship, household consumption, financial resilience and economic growth, while also documenting risks involving excessive indebtedness, fraud, predatory lending and digital exclusion. These findings indicate that the availability of financial products should be considered alongside their affordability, suitability and actual use. Ozili (2026) extends this debate by examining the role of excluded individuals and communities in shaping financial provision. The study broadens the conventional understanding of the BOP beyond income poverty to include disadvantages associated with education, employment, gender, religion, geographical location and other characteristics that may restrict participation in formal finance. Using conceptual discourse analysis, the author develops seven predictions linking unmet financial needs, social networks, institutional responses and economic mobility. The theory proposes that underserved populations may draw on relationships with community leaders, elected representatives, regulators, family members and other influential actors to communicate their needs and encourage providers to extend services. Persistent exclusion and hardship are also hypothesised to create incentives for disruptive or unlawful behaviour, including fraud, economic sabotage and violent protest. Cooperation between governments, financial institutions and other providers is presented as a potential means of improving livelihoods and addressing unmet demand.

A central element of the theory concerns movement within the economic pyramid. Financial services may enable individuals to establish businesses, undertake income-generating activities and accumulate assets, but access alone does not guarantee upward mobility. The proposed outcomes also depend on the frequency and effectiveness of service use, social connections and financial decision-making. Appropriate use of savings, credit and investment opportunities may support economic advancement, whereas unsuitable decisions can reinforce indebtedness and vulnerability. Ozili (2026)

formalises these relationships in a simple economic model linking the probability of moving out of, or remaining within, the BOP to financial inclusion and these additional factors. Its policy implications extend to affordable banking, microfinance, income-sensitive products, gender-responsive and age-appropriate services, accessible financial information, religion-compliant provision and measures addressing rural disadvantage. Digital technologies may help overcome geographical and cost barriers, although their effectiveness depends on infrastructure, financial literacy, consumer protection and institutional support. The study's theoretical contribution therefore raises further questions about how individual financial choices interact with labour market opportunities, commercial incentives and structural constraints to influence long-term economic mobility.

The distribution of opportunities created by economic development is examined empirically by Santaa (2026), who investigates the relationship between economic complexity and gender inequality in Ghana. The study considers whether increasingly sophisticated and diversified productive structures are associated with greater gender equality and how these relationships differ across time horizons. Human capital theory suggests that knowledge-intensive production may increase demand for qualified workers, encouraging educational investment and expanding women's employment opportunities. Research on economic complexity has similarly associated productive diversification with greater economic inclusion and lower income inequality. However, existing evidence indicates that these relationships may depend on institutional quality, levels of development and the distribution of access to skills, capital and higher-paying occupations. Ghana provides a relevant setting because its gradual transition from agricultural dependence towards services, industry and extractive activities has occurred alongside persistent gender disparities. Women remain disproportionately concentrated in informal and vulnerable employment, while men are more strongly represented in formal wage employment and higher-quality occupations. Santaa (2026) examines a comparatively underexplored direction of inquiry by considering how productive sophistication relates to gender inequality, extending research that has frequently concentrated on the contribution of gender equality to economic growth. The findings identify contrasting relationships over time. Greater economic complexity is associated with lower gender inequality in the long run, whereas short-run increases in productive sophistication may coincide with widening disparities. The analysis also establishes a long-run relationship among the variables, with relatively rapid adjustment towards the estimated equilibrium following temporary deviations.

Santaa (2026) interprets these differences through adjustment costs and unequal access to emerging economic activities. Expanding skill-intensive sectors may initially favour workers possessing established qualifications, experience and access to formal employment, potentially disadvantaging women where occupational segregation and institutional barriers persist. Over longer periods, increasing demand for skilled labour may encourage educational investment and create opportunities in higher-productivity occupations. The estimated associations are consistent with this interpretation but do not independently establish the proposed mechanisms. Additional findings indicate that population density is associated with higher gender inequality in the short run and lower inequality in the long run, while labour freedom, government expenditure and trade openness display differing relationships across these periods. Women's participation through the extensive employment margin is negatively associated with gender inequality over the longer term. The policy implications concern education, skills development, access to formal employment and the reduction of occupational barriers, particularly during the initial stages of structural upgrading. By employing a multidimensional indicator of gender inequality, the study provides country-specific evidence that extends research based primarily on international comparisons and aggregate income measures. The analysis highlights how the distributional consequences of productive transformation may change over time and depend on the conditions governing participation in emerging economic activities.

While Santaa (2026) examines the distribution of opportunities generated through structural transformation, Lawal (2026) investigates how legal and institutional arrangements can restrict workers' ability to benefit from economic participation. Through a comparative analysis of Thailand and Malaysia, the study considers why precarious employment persists despite established labour legislation and formal recognition of workers' rights. Particular attention is given to migrant workers, women, transgender individuals and people engaged in sex work, whose circumstances may expose them to heightened insecurity. Conventional labour market approaches associate precarity with unstable employment,

insecure earnings, limited benefits and insufficient social protection. Other perspectives emphasise globalisation, subcontracting and declining collective bargaining, while feminist and critical social theories examine the influence of migration status, gender and social exclusion. This literature indicates that individuals performing comparable activities may encounter different conditions according to their legal recognition and access to remedies. Lawal (2026) also addresses disagreements concerning sex work, distinguishing voluntary participation from forced labour, debt bondage and human trafficking, and recognising the different legal responses these circumstances require.

To explain how institutional arrangements may reproduce vulnerability, Lawal (2026) adapts the six propositions of Richard Quinney's theory of the social reality of crime to develop the Social Reality of Precarity model. The framework connects legal categorisation, the interests influencing legislation, discretionary enforcement, workers' responses to institutional constraints, public and media representations, and the reinforcement of these processes over time. Its application to Thailand highlights tensions between the economic significance of the sex industry and criminal regulation of prostitution, alongside difficulties involving police discretion, inconsistent enforcement and limited access to employment protections. Migrant workers may face additional risks associated with uncertain registration status, employer dependence and potential immigration consequences when reporting abuse. In Malaysia, employer-linked migration arrangements can restrict workers' ability to leave exploitative employment, while recruitment debts, passport confiscation, unpaid wages and excessive working hours create further vulnerabilities. Regulations affecting sex work and gender expression also influence the treatment of migrant women and transgender individuals. Although similar mechanisms operate in both countries, differences in migration systems, legal traditions and social attitudes shape their consequences.

An important feature of Lawal's (2026) analysis is its recognition that institutional constraints and individual agency can coexist. Workers facing deportation, prosecution or exclusion from formal employment may have limited options for challenging abusive conditions, yet they may also respond through mobility, informal support networks, collective organisation and legal action. The study consequently identifies potential policy directions involving migration reform, more consistent labour inspection, accessible complaint mechanisms, recognition of workers' organisations and measures addressing social stigma. Its principal contribution is conceptual and comparative, connecting criminological explanations of legal classification and enforcement with research on labour exploitation and migration. The study extends understanding of how state authority and social exclusion may influence labour market vulnerability even where formal protections exist.

A further dimension of economic exploitation is explored by Boddy and Paraskevopoulou (2026), who examine the relationship between psychopathic personality traits and harmful conduct across organisational, economic and social settings. Their contribution considers whether individual characteristics can help explain differences in exploitative behaviour among people operating within comparable institutional environments. Drawing on research in organisational psychology, management, destructive leadership, corporate governance and behavioural studies of psychopathy, the authors examine characteristics associated with manipulation, emotional detachment, limited concern for others and self-interested decision-making. Existing scholarship suggests that confidence, apparent charm and persuasive self-presentation may enable some individuals displaying elevated psychopathic traits to obtain positions of authority, despite potentially harmful patterns of behaviour. These possibilities are particularly relevant in organisations where recruitment and promotion reward assertiveness, competitiveness and short-term performance without sufficient attention to ethical conduct.

The literature reviewed by Boddy and Paraskevopoulou (2026) identifies associations between psychopathic traits and interpersonal manipulation, deception, fraud, aggressive conduct and the mistreatment of vulnerable individuals. Within organisations, these characteristics have been linked to abusive supervision, employee distress, workplace bullying and unethical business decisions. The review also considers financial misconduct, human trafficking, sexual coercion, organised crime and environmental offending, extending the discussion beyond conventional employment relationships. Across these activities, the pursuit of financial gain, power or control, combined with limited concern for others, is proposed as a possible behavioural mechanism. However, the evidence varies across the domains examined, and the identified associations do not establish psychopathy as either a necessary or sufficient cause of exploitation. The authors also distinguish between personality characteristics that may

be present without criminal conduct and more severe manifestations associated with antisocial or violent behaviour. The study places particular emphasis on how personal characteristics interact with organisational opportunities. Individuals occupying senior positions may influence employment conditions, resource allocation and standards of corporate conduct, with consequences extending beyond immediate workplace relationships. Extensive managerial discretion and weak accountability may enable harmful behaviour, while effective oversight, employee representation and ethical governance can help prevent it. Boddy and Paraskevopoulou (2026) identify opportunities for further research into whether elevated psychopathic traits intensify the adverse effects of insecure working conditions and whether particular organisational environments attract, reward or retain individuals displaying exploitative tendencies. The study's principal contribution is to introduce a behavioural perspective that complements structural and institutional explanations by examining how the characteristics and decisions of those exercising organisational authority may influence exploitative practices.

Across the six contributions, several broader questions emerge concerning how exploitation and inequality are experienced. Economic structures influence access to resources, opportunities and bargaining power; legal and institutional arrangements determine the conditions under which rights can be exercised; and organisational practices and individual behaviour affect the treatment of workers and vulnerable populations. These dimensions may interact, helping to explain why similar economic circumstances produce different outcomes across social groups and institutional settings. Their relative importance, however, depends on the particular mechanisms under investigation. A further consideration concerns the distinction between economic participation, formal protection and substantive improvements in living and working conditions. Greater productive sophistication, wider access to financial services, expanded employment opportunities and stronger regulatory commitments do not necessarily generate equitable outcomes. Their consequences depend on how benefits and risks are distributed, whether individuals can exercise meaningful choices and how institutional safeguards operate in practice. The articles also demonstrate the importance of distinguishing economic inequality from exploitation, recognising that disadvantage can arise through different processes whose identification requires careful conceptual and empirical analysis.

The collective significance of the inaugural issue lies in the diversity of its approaches and the questions it leaves open. The conceptual and theoretical contributions develop frameworks and propositions for further investigation, while the empirical studies present findings that require interpretation in light of methodological assumptions, data limitations and specific contexts. This diversity illustrates the value of pluralism and the importance of distinguishing proposed mechanisms, observed associations and established causal relationships. The articles neither establish a unified explanation of exploitation and inequality nor imply that identical institutional responses are appropriate across different circumstances. Their contribution lies in extending scholarly understanding of the relationships between economic power, social disadvantage, governance and individual agency, while opening new opportunities for critical inquiry. In this respect, the inaugural issue provides an initial illustration of the intellectual exchange that JOEEI seeks to encourage across theoretical traditions, disciplines and areas of economic research.

3. Concluding Reflections and Future Directions

The publication of the inaugural issue marks an important starting point in the development of JOEEI as a forum for scholarly inquiry into economic exploitation and inequality. The six contributions illustrate the breadth of questions confronting this field and the different analytical approaches through which they may be investigated. They also reveal important areas of uncertainty concerning how exploitative relationships are identified, how economic and institutional mechanisms interact, and under what conditions changes in economic opportunities, legal protections and organisational practices lead to substantive improvements in people's lives. Addressing these questions requires sustained theoretical development, careful empirical investigation and attention to the circumstances in which particular economic and social outcomes arise.

An important direction for future research concerns the development of more precise explanations of the relationships between economic inequality and exploitation. Although these phenomena are frequently interconnected, their underlying mechanisms may differ, and observed disadvantages do not

necessarily establish the presence of exploitative practices. Further investigation is therefore needed into how economic power is exercised, how institutional arrangements influence the distribution of benefits and risks, and how individuals and organisations respond to the opportunities and constraints they encounter. The contributions presented in this issue also suggest the value of examining these relationships across different levels of analysis, recognising that structural conditions, institutional practices and individual behaviour may interact in ways that vary between populations, economic activities and geographical settings. Advancing understanding in these areas will depend on the capacity of researchers to engage critically with competing explanations and evaluate their implications through appropriate methods and evidence. Pluralism provides opportunities to examine assumptions that may remain unquestioned within particular intellectual traditions, while methodological diversity can help illuminate dimensions of economic relationships that are difficult to capture through a single analytical approach. Such engagement does not require agreement between researchers or the reconciliation of all theoretical differences. Constructive disagreement, supported by conceptual clarity, methodological transparency and careful interpretation of findings, can contribute to identifying the strengths and limitations of existing explanations and developing new questions for investigation.

The international character of JOEEI offers further opportunities to examine how economic exploitation and inequality vary across institutional, historical and social contexts. Comparative research can help assess the relevance of proposed mechanisms beyond the circumstances in which they were initially developed, while scholarship drawing on different geographical experiences and forms of knowledge may challenge assumptions embedded in established academic debates. Encouraging contributions from researchers across regions, disciplines and intellectual traditions is therefore important not only for broadening participation but also for strengthening the explanatory scope and relevance of economic inquiry. The relationship between scholarly research and wider economic and social debates will remain central to this endeavour. Investigations into exploitation and inequality can contribute to public understanding by clarifying contested concepts, assessing the evidence underlying competing interpretations and examining the consequences of alternative institutional arrangements. Research may also identify limitations in existing policies and practices or reveal unintended effects that warrant further consideration. Maintaining openness to such findings is essential if academic inquiry is to inform debate without presupposing particular theoretical conclusions or policy outcomes.

The longer-term development of JOEEI will depend on the scholarly community that contributes to its work. Authors, reviewers, editors and readers share responsibility for maintaining standards of intellectual integrity, constructive criticism and academic rigour. Supporting emerging researchers, encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration and creating opportunities for international scholarly exchange will be important to this collective effort. The journal's intellectual identity should consequently develop through the quality of the research it publishes, the questions it encourages scholars to pursue and its willingness to accommodate critical examination of established assumptions, including those underlying its own research priorities. The inaugural issue provides a foundation for this continuing scholarly endeavour. Its lasting significance will depend on the extent to which the questions and approaches introduced here stimulate further investigation, generate new evidence and contribute to more precise understandings of economic exploitation and inequality. By fostering sustained inquiry across theoretical perspectives, methodological traditions and geographical contexts, JOEEI seeks to advance academic knowledge while contributing to informed discussions about economic institutions, social responsibility and the conditions that may support more equitable economic and social arrangements.

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Table 1. Ten priority research agendas addressing critical problems in economic exploitation and inequality

Priority research agenda	Critical problem	Central research question
1. Conceptualising and measuring economic exploitation	Conventional inequality indicators may fail to capture exploitative relationships and practices.	How can economic exploitation be conceptualised and measured independently of, and in relation to, conventional indicators of inequality?
2. Artificial intelligence and algorithmic exploitation	Algorithmic management, automated decision-making and workplace surveillance may create new asymmetries of economic power.	Under what conditions do AI-driven technologies generate, reinforce or reduce exploitative economic relationships?
3. Precarious employment and labour market transformation	Non-standard employment and weak labour protections may transfer economic risks disproportionately towards workers.	Which labour market arrangements increase vulnerability to exploitation, and which institutional protections are most effective?
4. Modern slavery and failures of institutional protection	Forced labour, human trafficking and severe exploitation persist despite legal prohibitions and governance initiatives.	Which economic and institutional mechanisms explain the persistence of severe exploitation, and how effectively do existing interventions address them?
5. Corporate power and global supply-chain exploitation	Unequal bargaining power and fragmented responsibility may enable the transfer of economic costs and risks to vulnerable workers and communities.	How do corporate governance, market power and supply-chain structures influence exploitative practices and their distributional consequences?
6. Intersectional inequality, discrimination and exploitation	Overlapping social disadvantages may create distinct forms of economic dependency and vulnerability.	How do intersecting inequalities influence exposure to exploitation and access to effective economic and institutional protection?
7. Colonial legacies and structural economic exploitation	Historical patterns of dispossession and unequal economic relationships may continue to shape contemporary economic institutions.	Through which mechanisms do historical and colonial relationships contribute to contemporary patterns of exploitation and inequality?
8. Environmental exploitation and ecological inequality	Environmental degradation and resource extraction may impose disproportionate costs on economically disadvantaged populations.	How do economic institutions distribute the benefits of resource use and the costs of environmental degradation across communities and generations?
9. Social, educational, community and financial institutions	Institutions may protect individuals from exploitation but may also reproduce exclusion, dependency and unequal economic power.	Under what circumstances do social and economic institutions mitigate or contribute to exploitation?
10. Institutional reforms and the effectiveness of anti-exploitation policies	Policies addressing poverty or inequality may leave underlying exploitative economic relationships unchanged.	Which institutional, regulatory and redistributive interventions effectively reduce exploitation, and under what economic and social conditions?

Notes: The research agendas outlined in Table 1 highlight the importance of distinguishing the conditions that generate economic inequality from the relationships and practices through which exploitation may occur. Although these problems are frequently interconnected, their underlying mechanisms may differ across institutional, geographical and historical contexts. Addressing them therefore requires pluralist approaches, methodological rigour and comparative research capable of examining competing explanations and assessing the consequences of alternative institutional arrangements. The proposed agendas also highlight the importance of advancing research that moves beyond identifying economic disadvantages towards explaining exploitative relationships and evaluating how they may be prevented or reduced.