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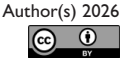
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Contesting Labour Violations in Uzbekistan's Cotton Fields

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Abstract

This article shares a co-written work and life biography of a prominent female international human rights defender working to strengthen civil society in Uzbekistan. We centre the article on the experience of Malika Nazar, who was falsely imprisoned and remains a person of interest to the authorities. Drawing on participant reflexivity interviews, a workshop and a public lecture, we contribute to the literature on coercive labour and actor agency in supply chains and Global Value Chains (GVCs) at a time of authoritarian crackdowns on activists across Uzbek society and in a context where labour rights monitors continue to face major threats and risks. The central contribution of this OtFL article is to showcase work and its tensions rooted in the Global East.

Keywords

cotton, Global Value Chains, labour, reflexivity, Uzbekistan

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Introduction

This work and life biography shares insight from Malika Nazar (pseudonym), an activist and founder of a human rights NGO, who works to strengthen civil society in Uzbekistan. In it, we document the experience of a female human rights defender falsely imprisoned in a post-Soviet authoritarian context. The literature on Global Value Chains (GVCs) interrogates questions on coercive labour, often building on Gereffi's (1999) early iterations of the GVC framework (see Anner, 2013; Blair, 2005; Chan et al., 2020; Locke, 2013; Ross, 2004; Selwyn, 2017; Taylor et al., 2013). A range of studies also illuminate worker and actor agency in supply chains and GVCs (Coe and Yeung, 2019; Crane et al., 2019; Mendonça and Adăscăliței, 2020). This research pinpoints structural factors that restrict worker agency, demonstrating that GVC frameworks can be useful in theorising and assessing forced labour and coercive work. However, there is little, if any, sociological research testimony from those on the front line defending international labour standards in Uzbekistan. Even though international law prohibits governments from forcing citizens to work against their will (UN General Assembly, 1948), Uzbekistan's agricultural industries enable workers' rights breaches on a mass scale (Schweisfurth and Niyazova, 2025). The country's cotton industry, a site of historical and significant state-sponsored forced labour (McGuire and Laaser, 2018), is an unwelcome environment for labour rights monitors, a contested space undergoing extensive restructuring and privatisation. There is, therefore, a need to document the voice of those challenging rights violations, in ways extending understanding beyond the structure, geographies and institutional contexts of GVCs (Crane et al., 2019) and lead firm–supplier relations (Frenkel et al., 2017: 3) (see also Gereffi et al., 2006). This is important because, presently, the authorities continue to crack down on activists who report rights violations; there are no independent trade unions, there is very little, if any, independent NGOs, leaving limited room for channels to report violations.

By couching the article at the base of national chains, in rights struggles and coercive working conditions in Uzbekistan's cotton fields, we unearth an original participant-centred reading, where Malika speaks for herself to convey sociological insight into work (Taylor et al., 2009). We bring Malika's testimony to light through real-time reflexivity (Weick, 2002: 897), where an active role is proscribed to our participant and the construction of research knowledge. We embed the study of a key actor in setting and contesting labour standards in understanding of the Global East, capturing the voice of the silenced but avoiding binaries such as dominated and subjugated, aggressor and victim, coloniser and colonised (Piacentini and Slade, 2024).

Through two reflexivity-in-practice interviews, a public lecture and a workshop (see Methods section for a brief explanation), we explore the work, life and biography of an international human rights defender in a context where regulatory quality, rule of law, political stability, control of corruption, and voice and accountability of citizens (Crane, 2013; Kaufmann et al., 2010) are often under threat. Hence, this article makes two contributions to knowledge. First, this is the first English language article to centre on the working life of an activist aiming to strengthen civil society and labour standards in a coercive authoritarian context. Second, with international aid budgets under threat, there is a risk to international organisations supporting labour standards and contesting rights

violations in countries including, but not limited to, Uzbekistan. Hence, Malika's voice, in work and employment and society scholarship, is not only original, but transcends borders, and invites further research into the social and cultural context of work in a place of geo-political contestation, hitherto erased from academic scholarship.

The article offers a short review of GVC concepts, taking in themes of labour agency and working conditions. We couch the discussion in an understanding of the industrial context of human rights defence work in Uzbekistan's cotton industry, before offering brief methodological notes on the reflexivity-in-practice interviews, lecture and workshop, and introducing our co-author.

GVCs, agency and working conditions in global chains

This section offers a short review of GVC concepts and research on agency and working conditions, which is then linked with the industrial context of the study. Indeed, there is a voluminous critical literature on labour and working conditions in global chains (e.g. Anner, 2013; Blair, 2005; Chan et al., 2020; Locke, 2013; Ross, 2004; Selwyn, 2017; Taylor et al., 2013; van der Pijl, 2015). A range of recent studies also focus on worker and actor agency in supply chains and GVCs (Coe and Yeung, 2019; Crane et al., 2019; Mendonça and Adăscăliței, 2020). Coe and Yeung (2019), for example, map recent conceptual developments, largely in economic geography, arguing that the tendency to characterise global production networks at the industry level (a hallmark of GVC approaches) has limitations. Crane et al. (2019) also contribute to understanding how forced labour emerges. Through a cross-industry analysis, that draws on a contested definition of forced labour, they articulate the dynamics of labour exploitation in domestic supply chains and draw attention to the relationship between different GVC structures and the existence of forced labour. Mendonça and Adăscăliței (2020) highlight the centrality of the workplace and the role that supply chain rationalisation plays in determining the reconfiguration of labour and working conditions. Together, they shed light on some of the factors that enable or constrain the agency of workers and actors in setting and contesting labour standards and violations.

Over the previous decades, too, scholars and policymakers have increasingly focused on working conditions in factories in textile and garment chains when examining labour violations associated with agricultural commodities (Mayer et al., 2016; Ngai, 2016). Substantial themes identified include weak adherence to workers' rights, non-compliance with international labour standards, antagonism towards trade unions, forms of forced labour, and difficulties regarding the management and governance of supply chains. Against a backdrop of lead firms transferring production to supply firms in transition economies characterised by weak government regulation, a widely held position, as noted above, relates to the centrality of lead firm–supplier relations as a core mechanism for explaining variations in labour standards (Frenkel et al., 2017: 3) (see also Gereffi et al., 2006). Here, analysis tends to consider aspects such as industrial relations in countries of supplier firms and national labour markets, where the explanation for workers' rights violations rests on inherent power asymmetries between firms. However, explanations focusing only on relationships between firms arguably fall short as they fail to capture the work and impact of human rights

defenders, downplaying their labour agency, in setting and contesting labour standards. Indeed, in the limited range of orthodox value chain research on Uzbekistan's cotton sector, repression, financial stagnation, poverty and environmental degradation is lightly acknowledged, while the focus remains on cotton flows, the actors involved, costs and income distribution (Rudenko et al., 2008).

The following section takes this conversation forward in two ways: first, considering the industrial context of human rights activism in Uzbekistan's cotton sector, before introducing the voice of our co-author.

Industrial context of human rights activism in Uzbekistan's cotton industry

This section links research on GVCs and labour agency in supply chains with an understanding of the broader industrial context of Uzbekistan's cotton sector. Over three decades after the demise of Soviet planning, cotton remains a salient sector in Central Asia, providing employment for a large fraction of the rural population (Babadjanov and Petrick, 2023). However, the country followed a similar path to many post-Soviet neighbours in Central Asia, insofar as it was once held up as a region blossoming in democratic freedoms in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Human Rights Watch, 1996) but joined other former Soviet republics in being among the world's worst for rights abuses. Unfair trials, controversial changes to the constitution on the right to protest, excessive use of force by a militarised police and concerns over the surveillance of human rights defenders are the industrial backdrop to what Gallo (2020: 340) refers to as 'international authoritarianism', where market forces commodified social relations, repurposing old-style Soviet authoritarian rule (Harvey, 2005).

The cotton industry is, however, a strategic and significant economic entity in Uzbekistan. Cotton is a valuable export commodity – in 2020, for example, the industry generated over US$1.2 billion from its exports (Asfaw, 2021). According to official data, 3.8 million tons of cotton was produced in Uzbekistan in 2023 (Uzbek Forum, 2024). The change of government in 2016, nevertheless, accelerated the pace of reform, triggering a plethora of new policy initiatives, and from 2018 onwards the government implemented a new production and processing system, known as the cluster system (Babadjanov and Petrick, 2023). Cotton clusters produce by direct farming and 'employ' workers using machine harvesting, or by contract farming, where clusters contract farmers to produce amounts of cotton at particular prices. Contract farmers generally harvest cotton by hand and rely on the availability of pickers (Uzbek Forum, 2024). Evidence in the same Uzbek Forum report documents the continued pressure exerted on officials, which raises risks to workers' rights and specifically the re-emergence of forced labour in the sector.

In the context of forced labour and cotton, Sulaymanov and Rasulov (2021) argue that while Uzbekistan has ratified various Labour Codes supporting fair work and safe work environments, the norms that underpin employment protections for cotton workers are under threat. There is substantial evidence of coercive practices, labour exploitation and repression being 'the lived reality of citizens' (Lasslett and Gstrein, 2018: 4), who live in

an authoritarian culture of surveillance, arbitrary detention and even torture. Today, therefore, the cotton industry continues to be a country-wide site of labour contestation, as supply chains have been criticised for being socially, economically and environmentally repressive (ILO, 2019; Macdonald, 2012; McGuire and Laaser, 2018, cited in Asfaw, 2021). While observers highlight dramatically reduced rates of forced labour in the cotton industry (ILO, 2021; Uzbek Forum, 2023) in 2024, instances of forced labour of state employees were documented, particularly in the early stages of the harvest (Uzbek Forum, 2024).

Methods: From theory to participant biography and narrative

This section clarifies the key methodological choices made, principally the sources of data and the positionality of our co-author, Malika. We draw on two reflexivity-in-practice interviews, a public lecture and a workshop as our key data sources. These sources informed a basic transcript and biography, which Malika then worked on and substantially redrafted, twice. Matters around knowledge of a subject relate to the positioning of participants (see Bourdieu, 2000). Hence, the interviews placed emphasis on real-time reflexivity (Weick, 2002: 897), where an active role was proscribed to Malika. Malika was a driver of the content, aware of her own positionality and barriers to agency, and continuously aimed to make sense of the questions posed. The subjects covered, and the approach taken, aimed to capture the voice of the silenced and exploited but in ways that recognise the cultural significance and institutional ties between the people and the state in the context of Uzbekistan's cotton harvest. As Müller and Trubina (2020) argues: the 'Global East is . . . a shorthand for power relationships not easily categorized into binaries'.

Introducing Malika: Setting the scene

Malika was arrested in Tashkent and sentenced to a long-term prison sentence on charges of 'illegally crossing a border', 'production or distribution of materials that threaten public safety and public order' and 'smuggling extremist religious materials'. After widespread outcry, she was released after four months. Since 2009, she has worked with a network of local human rights activists in Uzbekistan, often undercover, exposing workers' rights violations and monitoring forced labour. They call for wide-ranging reforms – calling on the government to take steps to empower civil society and ensure that textile clusters uphold international labour standards across all stages of production. Worryingly, international media received reports of harassment of a journalist and human rights activist, the latter being Malika, who were ambushed by two men outside one of their homes – they were both engaged in their usual activities associated with monitoring work.

Getting into the human rights field

I came to Germany in 2009 carrying knowledge about mass child labour in Uzbekistan's cotton sector. Earlier, I had participated in an important international study, travelling

across the country and interviewing farmers, parents and teachers. I found that information about mass child labour in Uzbekistan was not visible. Every autumn, one million schoolchildren and about 200,000 students, instead of studying, were forced to pick cotton for the state for two to three months. This uniquely large-scale system of coercion was unprecedented. However, this system remained invisible, even to UNICEF, which had an office in Uzbekistan, and to the World Bank. Only external pressure could change the situation. First-hand information was essential – irrefutable information – as the Uzbek government had denied the existence of the problem for many years.

With the help of several colleagues, we established a human rights organisation. We needed to create a reliable flow of information and find people inside Uzbekistan who would collect first-hand testimonies and document what was happening. Fifteen years ago, the internet and social media were not as developed, so we had to rely on trusted individuals living within Uzbekistan. Thanks to connections with Uzbek activists, I was able to find people who helped me monitor the situation.

I am originally from Uzbekistan and have been working in the human rights sector for 24 years. When I began my work, a friend's neighbour was the leader of a human rights organisation. He was looking for someone to translate court documents from Uzbek into Russian and I agreed to help. The documents were court verdicts of six car explosions and terrorist attacks that took place on 16 February 1999 in Tashkent city. While translating, I found that the government immediately blamed religious extremists. The security services arrested thousands of young men, accusing them of belonging to religious organisations and sentenced many to long prison terms. I was shocked: the evidence was clear that many had been tortured to extract confessions. I was then asked to translate more court evidence and court proceedings. It was an eye-opening experience that showed what was really happening. I translated the testimonies of those arrested and learned how they were arrested and tortured. I then started to help a small organisation that was working on torture and freedom of religion. During that time, I was invited to Geneva to present a report to the UN Human Rights Committee. Shortly afterwards, I graduated from a technical university as an electrical engineer and worked for the government in Uzbekistan, but my involvement in human rights was so strong that I realised I couldn't give up my human rights work. I *had* to be involved. I left my job and went to work for an NGO. I participated in human rights training and studied human rights at a prestigious school.

The deep end of human rights: Uprising, prison and presidential pardon

When I was coming back from the last training session, I was unexpectedly detained at the airport and my computer was confiscated. The authorities ran a check on its contents and found a NGO report about the Andijan massacre in 2005, which had resulted in the deaths of scores of innocent civilians. I had been helping to translate interviews with those involved in the uprising and meeting the relatives of people who had been arrested. Because of this, the authorities considered the materials to be a danger to public security.

The indictment, which is available in English, called for a seven-year prison sentence, and I was sent to pre-trial detention, where I spent four months in prison. Thanks to Human Rights Watch and other human rights organisations and diplomatic missions who raised my case internationally, I was released after four months. However, I was subjected to restricted freedom, which prohibited me from travelling for one year. It wasn't until the end of 2008 that I was pardoned by presidential decree and able to leave. At that time, the situation in the country was deeply oppressive. It was the worst of times: all the journalists and activists I knew had either left the country, been arrested, or were in prison. I left Uzbekistan and came to Germany.

Human rights defence work: Setting and contesting labour standards

Before I left, I was able to interview cotton pickers and farmers for a major report on the cotton sector in Uzbekistan. I travelled throughout Uzbekistan and spoke with children, farmers, pickers and public sector workers, such as university staff, teachers and doctors who were sent to pick cotton. At that time, it was not risky to conduct interviews simply because nobody really perceived it as a problem! There was no resistance from the populace because it was such a normal occurrence that had taken place for decades. I left Tashkent and worked for another NGO in Germany before founding a new NGO. I reached out to activists and journalists I knew who had stayed behind in Uzbekistan and asked them if they'd be willing to work with me on the cotton issue and to monitor child and adult forced labour. Slowly, I was able to build our network of activists, and we received support from different international funders to conduct training for activists and monitors. At the time, it was not possible to conduct training inside Uzbekistan, so we had to bring people together from outside the country.

Every year, from 2009, we monitored and reported on the situation of forced and child labour. We published many reports, memos, briefings and presentations, which became the basis of an international campaign to abolish child and forced labour in the cotton sectors of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The coalition was unique in that it brought together not only human rights organisations, but also business and textile associations, academia and trade unions. The coalition developed a strong advocacy strategy, and we submitted official complaints to the World Bank Inspection Panel. We did everything to raise awareness of the problem, but the forced mobilisation persisted. In the end, the dictator Karimov died, and the new president Shavkat Mirziyoyev committed to developing the cotton and textile sector. This opened the door for major human rights improvements, but it exposed many more workers' rights issues.

In terms of my recent work, we also work to protect human rights and strengthen civil society in Uzbekistan. Recently, we engaged extensively with the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) by reporting labour rights violations at Indorama Agro, a cotton project financed by both banks. In August 2023, we also filed a request for a compliance review with the Independent Project Accountability Mechanism (IPAM), the independent accountability mechanism of EBRD.

It is also crucial to support people who are working for change inside the country. We do this by providing training on human rights and monitoring techniques. We incubate and support civil society initiatives that raise awareness of rights violations and social issues in the Uzbek language that provide fora for critical discussion and sharing of information. In December 2024, we published a report on supply chain compliance citing monitoring findings of labour rights assessments at two of Uzbekistan's largest cotton textile companies. The internet has also become a very important place for resistance, information-sharing and critical thinking about how the country is run. However, the government retains strict control over the boundaries of what can and cannot be said publicly. We support bloggers, activists and journalists when they come under pressure from the authorities, which is happening with alarming frequency.

If I was to describe a normal day's activities, it would be that I spend a lot of time studying the situation because I need to understand all the nuances. One of the key findings of the report mentioned above is that independent monitoring is crucial for ensuring compliance and that the Uzbek government must create an enabling environment for freedoms of association and speech for that to take place.

At present, Uzbekistan is again cracking down on activists and bloggers who are reporting on rights violations in their communities – there are no independent trade unions and only a handful of NGOs, which are under constant surveillance by the state, leaving workers with practically no channels to report violations. That's what makes our work vital.

Over the past few years, however, the agricultural sector has been changing dynamically, with the adoption of at least 100 presidential and government decrees, along with various roadmaps to develop the sector. I dedicate significant time to communicating with the people about whom we report and whose lives we hope to improve. Social networks have opened up many opportunities to build direct contacts with farmers and workers in Uzbekistan. In addition, I assist local bloggers and activists in reporting human rights violations and editing articles and video reports, which we publish to inform the Uzbek audience. The uniqueness of our monitoring and reporting is that we not only collect and disseminate information about labour rights violations but also study the underlying causes of these processes.

Final thoughts on the system

Ideology and massive propaganda are the drivers of the system of forced labour in Uzbekistan. The state was able to convince people that it's not the state that wants this cotton; it is for the benefit of the people and the nation. The message was:

> If the cotton is not harvested on time, the rain will threaten the harvest. Do you want the whole crop to die? Don't you want more money for Uzbekistan? We will not be able to pay pensions, we will not be able to fund schools or build roads. It is the duty of every good Uzbek, every good Muslim, to help the nation.

It's a Soviet-style administrative system of controlling agriculture and industry. That means the government and local officials are responsible for the entire agricultural

process, and they give orders to farmers about what to produce, how to produce it, to whom to sell the products, and at what price. This isn't often understood by the academic community.

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Darren McGuire has research interests that span work, employment and labour, where he takes a critical multi-disciplinary approach, often leaning on moral economic concepts or capability approaches, in the social sciences and humanities. Darren recently co-edited a special issue on 'Moral Economy at the Crossroads of History and Social Science' in *Economic and Industrial Democracy* and is affiliated with the Centre for the Political Economy of Labour in Work, Employment and Organisation at Strathclyde. A former community development worker, Darren has a longstanding interest in local and international workers' rights and civil society. Darren is leading a new research project on moral norms and varieties of capitalism in the roll out of the cotton cluster system in Uzbekistan.

Malika Nazar (anonymised co-author name) is a founder and current director dedicated to defending human rights and strengthening civil society in Uzbekistan. Malika worked as a human rights advocate in Uzbekistan from 2000 to 2009, when she was forced to flee Uzbekistan because of her human rights work.

Laura Piacentini (FRSE, Fellow of Academianet, founded by Angela Merkel) is Professor of Criminology at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland. She teaches Criminology across all degrees and has supervised many PhDs. A multi-award-winning scholar, she specialises in penal cultures of the former Soviet Union and has held numerous grants. A Russian speaker, she was the first Westerner and woman to conduct empirical research in Russian prisons from the 1990s. She has travelled widely, including Kazakhstan, to examine the USSR's penal legacies. Compassionately committed to early career support, she is also an abolitionist and holds four UK degrees.

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