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MODERN SLAVERY STATEMENTS AND THE UK 'S LARGEST HOUSEBUILDING COMPANIES: AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH PAPER

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Modern slavery has been identified as a problem in the construction industry but the issue has received very limited attention in the academic literature. This exploratory paper looks to explore one of the ways in which the UK's largest housebuilding companies have publicly addressed the issue by reviewing their modern slavery statements.

Methodology/Approach: The paper adopts a simple methodological approach to review the modern slavery statements of the largest housebuilding companies within the UK, and offers some reflections on these statements.

Findings: The findings identified a number of policy and practice responses which characterised the selected housebuilding companies' approaches to modern slavery. The companies' approaches to modern slavery statements were seen to aspirational, and perhaps best described as a work in progress.

Limitations: The authors recognise that the paper has a number of limitations. The empirical material for the review is drawn exclusively from the corporate websites of the selected housebuilding companies at a set point in time, and does not include any primary information supplied by, or obtained from, the companies' executives, managers or employees, or any information obtained from the companies' contractors, subcontractors or suppliers

Originality: The paper offers an exploratory review of the modern slavery statements published by the largest housebuilding companies within the UK. As such the review makes a small contribution to addressing a gap in the academic literature on modern slavery within the housebuilding industry, and will hopefully stimulate future research in the field.

Keywords: Modern Slavery, Modern Slavery Statements, UK Housebuilding Companies, Construction Industry, Research Challenges

Introduction

Modern slavery, simply defined as *'the severe exploitation of other people for personal or commercial gain'* (Anti-Slavery International 2021, webpage) is an insidious problem in many sectors of the global economy. Within the UK construction industry, for example, the Chartered Institute of Building (2018, p. 8) reported that *'anti-slavery leaders have highlighted construction as a priority area'*, and that *'there is little doubt that UK construction supply chains are at risk of being infiltrated by criminal activities such as modern slavery.'* In his introduction to *'Construction and the Modern Slavery Act: Tackling Exploitation in the UK'* (Chartered Institute of Building 2018, p. 3), Chris Blythe, the Institute's Chief Executive, suggested *'we do not yet fully understand the extent to which modern slavery and human trafficking are affecting our sector, but a picture is emerging that is uncomfortable to say the least.'*

More specifically, in addressing modern slavery, the Vistry Group (2020, webpage), one of the UK's largest housebuilding companies, recognised that *'the construction industry generally can include areas of high risk, with a number of job roles which have a low skill requirement and provide potential opportunities for the exploitation of individuals.'* In a

similar vein, specialist housebuilder McCarthy Stone (2020, webpage) reported *'it is widely acknowledged that the construction industry is a high risk sector for modern slavery and human trafficking.'* While modern slavery is perceived to be a potential problem across the construction industry in the UK, the housebuilding industry can be seen to be bringing it close to home, through the purchase, and often the subsequent resale, of new houses, and by extensions to existing houses, and as such to touch the lives of growing numbers of people.

That said, the issue of modern slavery in the construction industry, and more specifically in the housebuilding industry, has received little, or no, attention in the academic literature. With these thoughts in mind, this paper explores one of the ways in which some of the UK's largest house building companies have addressed this issue by reviewing their modern slavery statements and to place them in a conceptual context by following Flynn and Walker's (2021) suggestion that institutional theory offers a way to understand and interpret these statements. As such, this paper looks to contribute to addressing a gap in the academic literature on modern slavery within the housebuilding industry. and will hopefully stimulate future research in the field. The paper includes a brief introduction to modern slavery and modern slavery statements, an outline of some of the relevant academic literature on modern slavery and of some of the challenges for research in this field, a description of the simple method of enquiry, a review of the modern slavery statements published by some of the UK's largest housebuilding companies, some reflections on these statements, and a conclusion which summarises the main findings and raises some future research agendas.

Modern Slavery and Modern Slavery Statements

There are many definitions of slavery and modern slavery, and while Allain and Bales (2012, p. 2) cited the first formal international definition of slavery signed in 1926, namely, *'slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised'* (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner Human Rights 2021, webpage), they argued *'the very term slavery and its contours are contested.'* Mende (2019, p. 233), argued that there *'is no single definition of the scope and form of modern slavery'*, but for Manzo (2006, p. 522), for example, *'the constituent elements of modern slavery are identified as control without ownership: violence (or the threat of violence); coercion (loss of freedom and choice); and exploitation (of labour power through unpaid work).'*

Landman and Silverman (2019, p. 277) argued that *'popular understandings of slavery often conjure up images of African slaves brought to the Caribbean, Brazil and the US, where such images typically include slave ships, slaves bound in chains and slaves auctioned at market'*, but that *'such imagery tends to obscure current realities of slavery and relegate it as a problem of the past.'* However, Landman and Silverman (2019, p. 277) argued that *'slavery is alive and well and that it has taken on new forms or updated old forms, comprising a variety of practices that include debt bondage, domestic servitude, forced prostitution, forced labour, forced marriage and human trafficking.'* Each of these activities has its own characteristics. Debt bonded labour, for example, perhaps the most widespread form of modern slavery, occurs where people trapped in poverty borrow money, and are forced into work to pay off the debt, and in so doing, lose control over their

employment conditions, and the original debt. Human trafficking, involves the use of violence, threats, or coercion to transport, and often to recruit, or harbour, people, for labour, forced prostitution, or marriage.

Bannerjee (2020, p.415) suggested that while slavery is a crime under international law, it remains '*a viable and profitable management practice for business*', and that '*modern slavery, far from being an aberration, is a logical outcome of the way our political economic system is organized and its historical origins in the colonial system.*' While slavery has been officially banned throughout the world it still exists, but now revolves around illegal control, rather than legal ownership. Conservative estimates put the number of victims of modern slavery at over 40 million (International Labour Office 2017), with the annual profits from modern slavery estimated to be some US\$ 150 billion (International Labour Office 2014).

In many ways modern slavery often effectively goes unseen in that many of the people working in slavery are in companies' supply chains, while in many companies those working in slavery may superficially look much the same as their fellow workers. That said, Unseen (2021), identified some indicative signs of modern slavery and human trafficking. Namely, individuals who show signs of physical or psychological abuse, look malnourished, unkempt, anxious or agitated, or appear withdrawn or neglected. Their living conditions might be dirty, cramped and overcrowded, and they might always wear the same clothes, have few personal possessions, and no identification documents. Further, they might be dropped off at, and collected from, their place of work, early in the morning and late at night, and they may be reluctant to seek help from fellow workers, and be very wary of law enforcement officers and agencies.

A number of governments, as well as a wide range of national and international organisations, have been active in looking to tackle the issue of modern slavery. Some of the major political initiatives to tackle modern slavery have focused on urging large companies to address modern slavery both within large own operations, and arguably more importantly, in their supply chains. In 2015 the UK Government, for example, pioneered this approach in introducing the Modern Slavery Act, requiring all organisations with an annual turnover in excess of £36 million, to produce an annual modern slavery statement. This legislation gave law enforcement agencies a variety of provisions to tackle modern slavery including a maximum life sentence in prison for perpetrators, and enhanced protection for victims. Under the terms of the 2015 legislation, while all organisations are not expected to guarantee that all their operations and supply chains are free from slavery, their modern slavery statements must describe the steps the organisation has taken during the financial year in question to address modern slavery risks. Here the challenge is for businesses is to take serious and effective steps to identify, and root out, modern slavery, and all businesses are encouraged to be vigilant and to focus on continuous improvement.

Modern Slavery: Literature Review and Research Challenges

To date, modern slavery in the housebuilding industry has attracted no attention in the academic literature. In part, this may reflect a reluctance within the housebuilding industry, and its supply chains, to permit researchers access to documentation and decision

makers, to allow them to pursue research investigations into modern slavery. Denying access for such research may reflect commercial sensitivities about essentially publicly unspoken corporate concerns about employee recruitment and labour practices within supply chains, and attendant fears of damaging publicity, and possibly criminal prosecution, if modern slavery practices are explicitly revealed. In part the lack of published research on modern slavery within the housebuilding industry may also reflect researchers' fears for their personal safety if looking to undertake research, in settings where illegal, and criminal activity may be commonplace, and then publish their research findings.

The issue of modern slavery has received limited attention in the academic literature and this is reflected in Caruana et al.'s (2020, p. 251) more general suggestion that the field of *'modern slavery research in business and management remains significantly, and disappointingly underdeveloped.'* While extensive online bibliographic searches revealed that the issue of modern slavery in the housebuilding industry, has received no attention in the academic literature, three strands of literature, namely research on modern slavery within the construction industry, on modern slavery in large companies' supply chains, and on theoretical approaches to the study of modern slavery, merit attention. Craven (2016) examined the potential role of public procurement in the fight to eradicate modern slavery in the UK construction industry, and suggested that it may complement the legislation in the 2015 Modern Slavery Act. Roy and Quellett-Plamondon (2019) reviewed how modern slavery affected the construction engineering industry in Canada and suggested that increased awareness, certification, industry self-regulation, and a range of digital technologies had a role to play in reducing the potential harm of modern slavery in the sector. Brickell et al. (2015) argued that Cambodia's booming construction industry effectively relied on a multinational workforce of adults and children trapped in debt bondage.

More generally, some work has been published on modern slavery in supply chains. Stevenson and Cole (2018), for example, examined how organisations in the UK reported on the detection and remediation of modern slavery in their supply chains. Their work revealed many firms used the same practices to detect and remediate modern slavery as for other social issues, but that the hidden, criminal nature of modern slavery and the involvement of third-party labour agencies demanded innovative investigative approaches. Flynn and Walker (2021) argued that companies effectively used their modern slavery statements to signal to society that they are strengthening their policies to prevent modern slavery in their supply chains, not least because companies found to be negligent in addressing modern slavery could lose the support of its economic and political stakeholders. Gold et al. (2015) looked to draw attention to the challenges modern slavery posed for supply chain management, and argued that a lack of ineffective indicators meant that new tools and indicator systems should be developed to consider the specific social, cultural and geographical context of supply regions. At the same time, Gold et al. (2015, p.485) suggested that once incidences of modern slavery had been detected, then *'multistakeholder partnerships, community-centred approaches and supplier development appear to be effective responses.'*

Meehan and Pinnington (2021) looked to assess if transparency in companies' supply chain statements indicated that substantive action was being taken to tackle modern

slavery in their supply chains. This research suggested that companies were using ambiguity in their supply chain statements *'as a highly strategic form of action to defend the status quo, reduce accountability and delay action for modern slavery within supply chains'*, and that this ambiguity, effectively *'protects firms, rather than potential victims of modern slavery'* (Meehan and Pinnington 2021, p. 77). Benstead et al. (2020) investigated modern slavery detection and remediation in supply chains via an action research case study in the textiles and fashion industry. This study suggested that *'a targeted audit'*, which included *'investigating the end-to-end recruitment process by using a parallel structure of management and worker interviews and documentation review'*, was more likely *'to identify key indicators of modern slavery'* (Benstead et al. 2020, webpage).

Flynn and Walker (2021, p.296) suggested that the empirical work published to date on modern slavery had *'yielded valuable insights into what firms claim to be doing to combat modern slavery'*, but that *'missing from the literature, however, is the theoretical framing of the issues'*, and that this omission *'limits our ability to understand how and why firms give effect to government and societal expectations on preventing modern slavery.'* In a similar vein, Gold et al. (2015) called for new theory development to facilitate the understanding of modern slavery. This, in part, was reinforced by Caruana et al.'s (2020) suggestion that while modern slavery presented many opportunities for novel theory building, existing theories were limited in their ability to conceptualise modern slavery.

That said, Bales (2006, p.2) looked to build a *'theory of modern or contemporary slavery through a set of assertions concerning the impact of global demographic and economic change on the nature of the slavery relationship over the past fifty to sixty years.'* Manzo (2006, p. 532) proposed an alternative approach to that adopted by Bales, which she classified as being drawn from *'Marxian or neo-Marxian political economy.'* Here the key themes were commodity production and trade, labour costs within a hierarchical division of labour, unequal terms of trade, capitalist expansion vis commodification and economic liberalisation, and the varied and uneven effects of the worldwide expansion of capitalism.

In looking to conceptual approaches to help to understand and interpret modern slavery at the corporate, rather than the macro, level, three sets of theoretical approaches, namely, stakeholder theory, contingency theory and institutional theory, merit attention. Stakeholder theory suggests that companies need to look to reflect the views of all their stakeholders, including, shareholders, suppliers, customers, employees and the company itself, in pursuing policies. Stevenson and Cole (2018), for example, argued that stakeholder theory was valuable in that while the primary audiences for modern slavery statements were external stakeholders, it was important for companies to consider what their modern slavery statements revealed to their suppliers. Contingency theory, suggests that in addressing any issue, a company's optimal course of action is contingent upon its internal and external situation. Here, Gold et al. (2015), for example, argued contingency theory could help to achieve a deeper appreciation of the importance of culture, geography, legislation and regulation in understanding modern slavery.

Flynn and Walker (2020, p. 296) emphasised the value of institutional theory in helping to understand how companies were responding to modern slavery risks, and to

explore the institutional pressures on companies to introduce measures to combat modern slavery. Here, Flynn and Walker (2021, p.296) argued that the transparency provision in the UK's 2015 modern slavery legislation represented institutional, rather than market, pressure on companies, and argued that this pressure *'is imposed on firms from outside by legislation, non-governmental organisation campaigning, professional standards, stakeholder initiatives, media coverage and consumer activism.'* More specifically, Flynn and Walker (2021, p. 301) identified *'policy responses'* and *'practice responses'* to institutional pressures. Here, the former included policies for preventing modern slavery and codes of conduct, while the latter covered risk assessment, the development of key performance indicators and training. Further, Flynn and Walker (2021) suggested that institutional theorists took the view that such pressures cause companies to adopt their policies and practices and can result in many companies converging on similar policies because they are responding to the same external pressures.

Method of Enquiry

In order to undertake a review of the UK's largest housebuilding companies' modern slavery statements, the authors chose a simple method of enquiry, which they believe to be fit for purpose. The top ten housebuilding companies in the UK, as reported by Stone Real Estate (pbc 2020, webpage), and as measured by the number of completions in 2019, namely Barratt Developments, Persimmon, Taylor Wimpey, Bellway, Redrow, Countryside, Galliford Try, Bovis, the Berkeley Group, Crest Nicholson and McCarthy Stone, were initially selected for study. However, in 2020 Bovis merged with Galliford Try and the new company was named the Vistry Group, so the study encompassed the UK's nine largest housebuilding companies. The authors felt that the nine companies, were suitably representative of large housebuilding companies in the UK, that they might be expected to reflect good practice in publicly addressing modern slavery, and that they provided an appropriate frame of reference for an exploratory study.

At the same time, the authors decided to concentrate their study exclusively on the selected companies' modern slavery statements, in the light of Flynn and Walker (2021) argument that modern slavery statements *'provide a unique window into corporate behaviour on modern slavery'*, and in the belief that such an approach was appropriate in a field where there is little, or no published work, to date. The authors undertook a series of Internet searches, using modern slavery statement and the name of each of the selected companies as key terms, on Google in June 2021. These searches revealed that all of the selected housebuilding companies had published a modern slavery statement and the most recent modern slavery statements provided the source material for this review.

As these modern slavery statements are in the public domain on the housebuilding companies' corporate websites, the authors took the view that they did not need to seek formal permission to use them. The statements were relatively brief, clearly structured and the major themes were clearly signposted, and the authors felt that any form of content analysis would be unnecessary. Rather, the authors undertook a close reading of the modern slavery statements and looked to draw out the building companies' responses to the Modern Slavery Act as identified within these statements by following Flynn and Walker's use of institutional theory and their identification of policy and practice responses.

The paper draws extensively on quotations drawn from the modern slavery statements, and the aim here, was to explore how the housebuilding companies publicly expressed, and looked to evidence, their approaches to tackling modern slavery. Here, the authors were of the opinion that an important way of capturing such approaches was to cite the housebuilding companies' own words, not least in that such citations could convey corporate authenticity, and offer greater depth of understanding. The specific examples and quotations drawn from the housebuilding companies' modern slavery statements were used for illustration purposes, and there was no attempt to undertake any comparative analysis of variations in the companies' approaches to such statements.

Findings

The authors' reading of the modern slavery statements published by the selected housebuilding companies identified both policy and practice responses. In addressing policy responses three elements were identified. Firstly, in introducing their modern slavery statements, all the selected housebuilding companies emphasised that these statements had been produced in compliance with the 2015 Modern Slavery Act. Redrow (2020, webpage), for example, *reported 'this statement is made pursuant to section 54(1) of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and constitutes our slavery and human trafficking statement for the financial year ending 28 June 2020.'* Countryside (2020) reported that its modern slavery statement was made pursuant to the 2015 legislation, and set out the steps that Countryside Properties PLC, its subsidiary companies and their relevant joint ventures, have taken, and are continuing to take, to detect and combat modern slavery and human trafficking. Some companies explicitly reported on the locus of responsibility for their modern slavery statements. Barratt Developments (2020, webpage), for example, emphasised *'our Chief Executive, on behalf of the Board, has responsibility for this statement and our Group Human Resources Director is the Executive Sponsor. Individual Group Functional Directors are accountable for compliance with the Act. Divisional Managing Directors are responsible for their local supplier relationships and compliance with the requirements of the Act.'*

The secondly policy element was the housebuilding companies' corporate commitment to combat modern slavery, though this commitment was expressed in a variety of ways. Taylor Wimpey (2020, p. 1), for example, claimed that the company *'strictly prohibits the use of modern slavery and human trafficking in our operations'*, while Barratt Developments (2021, webpage) reported the company was committed *'to trading ethically, with zero tolerance for modern slavery (including human rights violations, child or forced labour or human trafficking in any form), in our own operations or in our supply chain.'* Redrow (2019, webpage) is *'committed to trading ethically with zero tolerance for modern slavery, human trafficking and child labour'*, and to *'improving our practices to combat modern slavery and human trafficking.'* Bellway (2020, p.1) reported *'we are committed to ensuring that there is no modern slavery, servitude and forced compulsory labour or human trafficking in our supply chains or in any part of our business.'* Crest Nicholson (2021, webpage) claimed to be *'committed to operating ethically, with zero tolerance for modern slavery, across our business and in our relationships with stakeholders.'*

Thirdly, a number of the selected housebuilding companies reported operating a number of policy initiatives that supported their approach to combating modern slavery. Countryside (2020, webpage), for example, reported that its modern slavery statement *'reflects our commitment to acting ethically and with integrity in all our business relationships and to implementing and enforcing effective systems and controls to ensure slavery and human trafficking is not taking place anywhere in our supply chains.'* Countryside (2020, webpage) also reported the company's anti-corruption policy and whistle blowing policy and on its Code of Conduct, *'which explains the manner in which all Countryside employees and agents must behave and how we expect our suppliers and contractors to act.'* Barratt Developments (2021, webpage), emphasised that all its suppliers must follow its *'Code of Conduct'*, and that the company employed a number of procedures, including periodic review meetings and comprehensive audits, to monitor compliance. Taylor Wimpey (2020, p. 2) reported that the company required all suppliers to abide by its *'Supplier Code of Conduct'*, which *'sets out the slavery and trafficking principles which we expect our suppliers, contractors and business partners to uphold.'*

A range of practice responses were also identified in the selected housebuilding companies' modern slavery statements, namely, risk assessments and due diligence; awareness raising, capacity building, and training; and future plans and key performance indicators. Risk assessments offered some insights into the housebuilding companies' perceptions of the scale and the sources of modern slavery. Bellway (2020, p.2), for example, reported that the risk of modern slavery within its business *'is low'*, while (Persimmon (2020, webpage) claimed that it had *'a low overall risk of modern slavery in both our operations and within our immediate supply chain.'* However, Persimmon (2020) suggested that some specific risk areas had been identified including non-compliance by subcontractors with labour related legislation, and the sourcing of a small minority of goods from nations with perceived high exposure to modern slavery risks. By way of contrast, Crest Nicholson (2021, webpage) identified two areas of its business and operations to be at risk of modern slavery and human trafficking, namely on-site labour and construction materials.

The Berkeley Group (2020, p.5) reported that *'the procurement of materials and the supply of labour are two of the key areas within the supply chain that Berkeley has identified as presenting a greater risk of modern slavery.'* More specifically, the Berkeley Group (2020, p. 5) acknowledged that its supply chain was geographically diverse, that materials used in the company's developments were procured not only from the UK, but also from Europe and the rest of the world, and included *'countries where there is a higher risk of modern slavery and/or child labour.'* At the same time, the Berkeley Group (2020, p. 5) also reported that its contractors supply their own labour to work on Berkeley construction sites, and that *'some of this labour is presently from non-UK countries and there is a risk that some foreign labour could have been trafficked.'* More topically, the Berkeley Group (2020, p. 5) reported that *'the Covid-19 global pandemic may have increased pressure on supply chains, and as a result, the risk of modern slavery.'*

Some of the housebuilding companies reported on due diligence in their modern slavery statements. Bellway (2020, p.2), for example, outlined a number of its *'due diligence processes.'* These processes included signing up to the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse

Authority's Construction Protocol, enhancing the company's verification checks to minimise the risk of slavery, and using posters, wallet cards, and staff newsletters to continue to promote the company's confidential reporting facility where concerns about modern slavery, human trafficking and illegal working can be raised. The Berkeley Group (2020) reported on conducting due diligence with its contractors, on the procurement of materials, and on the provision of labour. In addressing due diligence, Persimmon (2020, webpage) claimed that its internal audit group conducted *'regular checks and data analyses to ensure adherence to procedures'*, and that *'through periodic internal audits, assurances are sought from suppliers to ensure appropriate safeguards are in place on the ethical sourcing of the materials.'*

The housebuilding companies often acknowledged the importance of awareness raising, capacity building, and training in looking to tackle modern slavery. Countryside (2020, webpage), for example, reported conducting periodic training for all the company's procurement, buying, and construction teams *'so that they can understand the signs of modern slavery and what to do if they think it is taking place within our supply chain.'* Countryside (2020, webpage) also reported *'running awareness programmes to reinforce Countryside's zero tolerance approach to modern slavery.'* Under the banner *'Modern Slavery Act Training'*, Taylor Wimpey (2020) reported on rolling out two elearning education modules, designed to identify modern slavery risk factors within the company's business, and to ensure that employees know the appropriate channels to report suspected incidents of modern slavery. In a similar vein, Crest Nicholson (2021, webpage) reported on the company's *'modern slavery e-learning programme'*, that *'outlines the risks of modern slavery in our industry, with particular emphasis on spotting the signs of modern slavery practices occurring on site.'*

A number of the selected housebuilding companies reported on their future plans to continue their battle against modern slavery. Under the banner *'Future Steps'*, McCarthy Stone (2020, webpage), for example, reported looking to align its policies and procedures on modern slavery and human trafficking with best practice and changes in legislation. The Berkeley Group (2020, p. 14) reported the company's commitment *'to increasing our understanding of the risks of modern slavery and child labour in its supply chain'*, and to pursuing a range of actions to help to eradicate modern slavery. These actions included rolling out a new modern slavery training programme, ensuring that labour contractors carry out robust checks on sub-contractors, and drawing upon experiences shared across the housebuilding industry.

A minority of the selected housebuilding companies suggested that they were moving towards identifying key performance indicators in meeting their commitments to tackling modern slavery. McCarthy Stone (2020, webpage), for example, identified four key performance indicators. These indicators were the percentage of site managers and assistant site managers who had completed the modern slavery e-learning modules; the percentage of senior executives who had completed these modules; the percentage of high-risk suppliers who had been issued with modern slavery questionnaires; and the percentage of supply chain codes of conduct signed by key suppliers and high-risk suppliers. Taylor Wimpey (2020, p. 3) also reported looking to *'agree key performance indicators to measure how*

effective we have been in ensuring that slavery or human trafficking is not taking place in our business or supply chain.'

Reflections

The housebuilding companies' modern slavery statements illustrate their public approach to what is a complex and challenging issue, but some wider issues merit reflection and discussion. Firstly, the findings reported above suggest that while the selected housebuilders were at that most emphatic in expressing their opposition to modern slavery, some of their commitments are aspirational, and can perhaps best be seen as a work in progress. Identifying, reporting, and tackling modern slavery within supply chains, and in the labour recruitment process by contractors and subcontractors, present major challenges for housebuilding companies, and they are challenges that are at least one step removed from their direct corporate control.

Here, some of the selected housebuilding companies reported looking to the auditing of suppliers to monitor compliance with corporate policies, but concerns have been expressed about the efficacy of audit processes in safeguarding against modern slavery. The pressure group Anti-Slavery International (2021, webpage), for example, argued that such approaches have their limitations, not least in that *'the quality and scope of auditing may be questionable, or there may be practical difficulties, such as auditors being unable to speak with workers in their own language.'* Further, Anti-Slavery International (2019, webpage) claimed that *'even when auditing is of high quality, audits by necessity are merely a snapshot of a particular moment in a particular part of the production system'*, and that *'the auditing mindset tends to be linear and mechanistic and may compartmentalise symptoms, preventing observers from seeing the whole complex picture which might together constitute forced labour.'*

Secondly, the concept of the modern slavery statement itself has attracted a number of criticisms. Simic and Blitz (2019, p. 2), for example, argued that modern slavery statements are *'often perfunctory and are used to satisfy international agendas and country commitments, or to enhance the perception of the country and its position in the global outsourcing business.'* Further, Simic and Blitz (2019, p.6) also argued that the capacity of modern slavery statements *'is often limited, especially as regards remedying risks'*, and that *'the quality, scope, depth, and regularity of reports are frequently compromised, especially since there are no meaningful sanctions for non-compliance.'* The issue of noncompliance is pressing, not least in that Monciardini et al. (2021, p. 326) suggested that within the UK non-compliance with the 2015 legislation *'is a common occurrence.'*

This, in turn raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of modern slavery statements in tackling, and ideally eradicating, modern slavery. New and Hsin (2021), for example, argued that while modern slavery statements *'present interesting information about the management of working conditions in the firms' supply chains, they do little to address the problems of modern slavery per se.'* In posing the question, *'What are corporations, as responsible citizens, doing to eliminate modern slavery?'*, Bannerjee (2021, p. 416) suggested *'most corporations do very little apart from issuing public statements and commitments to eradicate forced labour.'* Perhaps more tellingly, Bannerjee (2021, p. 417)

argued *‘there is a real danger that corporations involved in modern slavery can use the Modern Slavery Act to bolster their corporate social responsibility credentials, which then serve as a smokescreen to conceal practices of modern slavery.’*

Thirdly, this review of the modern slavery statements published by the UK’s largest housebuilding companies can be viewed against the limited literature on modern slavery summarised earlier in the paper. At a general level, in that the current paper employs secondary, rather than primary source material, this might be seen to reflect concerns about the dangers of undertaking first hand empirical investigations into modern slavery, and of looking to publish the results of such work. More specifically, the modern slavery statements published by the housebuilding companies can be seen to be consistent with Roy and Quellett-Plamondon (2019) belief that self-regulation had a role to play in reducing the potential harm of modern slavery in the construction sector. Arguably less positively, there was little evidence in the selected companies’ modern slavery statements of innovative approaches to identifying modern slavery, as recommended by Stevenson and Cole (2018) or of the development of new tools and indicator systems as suggested by Gold et al. (2015).

On the theoretical side, the review served to highlight the housebuilding companies’ perceptions of the links between modern slavery and both global sources of raw material supplies, and cheap sources of international labour, as suggested by Bales (2006) and Manzo (2006). At the corporate level, contingency theory helps to shed some light on how the housebuilding companies approached modern slavery, but perhaps only in so far as it signals that some of the characteristics of the industry, namely its use of globally sourced raw materials and labour supplies, seem to make them susceptible to modern slavery. In highlighting the role and importance of a number of stakeholders, including suppliers, contractors and sub-contractors, employees, and customers, stakeholder theory might be seen to be useful in informing how the selected housebuilding companies have developed, and may enhance, their modern slavery statements. However, stakeholder theory is generally seen to be based on, and around, open relationships, trust and shared goals, and these qualities are certainly not common to all the parties involved in modern slavery.

Arguably more positively, institutional theory provided a framework to help interpret how the selected housebuilding companies had responded positively to the 2015 Modern Slavery Act, and more specifically to help to appreciate the importance of a number of their policy and practice responses. This was positively reflected, for example, in the companies’ approaches to raising awareness, capacity building, and training, and risk assessment and due diligence. At the same time, some companies’ focus on internal, rather than independent, auditing, and their limited approach to identifying, and reporting on, key performance measures suggests that institutional theory does not capture the full story in conceptualising corporate approaches to modern slavery. More generally, while all the selected companies had their own individual approach to their modern slavery statements, institutional theory’s prediction that companies will begin to exhibit similar responses to institutional pressures, described as the *‘process of isomorphism’*, by Flynn and Walker (2021, p. 297), because they are responding to the same institutional pressures, does seem to hold.

Conclusions

Having identified modern slavery in the housebuilding industry as a gap in the academic literature, this paper outlined some of the challenges for researchers on modern slavery and some of the relevant academic literature in this field, before reviewing the modern slavery statements published by the UK's largest housebuilding companies. As such, the review makes an initial contribution to the literature on modern slavery in the housebuilding industry. The authors' reading of the modern slavery statements, informed by Flynn and Walker's (2021) use of institutional theory, led to the identification of a number of policy and practice responses which characterised the selected housebuilding companies' approaches to modern slavery. At the same time, the authors suggested that in some ways the housebuilding companies' approaches to modern slavery were aspirational, and can perhaps best be seen as a work in progress. Identifying, reporting, and tackling modern slavery within supply chains and in the labour recruitment process by subcontractors, present major challenges for housebuilding companies and they are challenges that are at least one step removed from their direct corporate control.

The findings of the review also have some partly interlinked implications for the housebuilding companies and more generally for society. At the corporate level, the production of modern slavery statements should be just one element in the housebuilding companies' approach to combat, and ideally eradicate, modern slavery. While corporate commitment to modern slavery statements provides an important framework within which to tackle modern slavery, their approaches must be embedded in the housebuilding companies' everyday operations. Here, for example, the housebuilding companies may be advised to strengthen the independence, the quality, and the scope of their auditing processes. While pursuing such a course of action will generate new costs, it will help to increase transparency and public accountability. That said, it remains to be seen how many prospective house purchasers will consult a company's modern slavery statement, or if the housebuilding companies will actively draw prospective purchasers' attentions to their, often unspoken, concerns about modern slavery within their supply chains and labour contraction processes.

The authors recognise that the review has a number of limitations. The empirical material for the review is drawn exclusively from the corporate websites of the selected housebuilding companies, and does not include any primary information supplied by, or obtained from, the companies' executives, managers or employees, or any information obtained from the companies' contractors, subcontractors or suppliers. However, the authors believe this approach is appropriate in what is an explanatory paper, which makes a small contribution to an area that has received very limited attention to date in the academic literature, and that it may provide a platform for future research into modern slavery in the industry.

Looking to future research agendas, while modern slavery within the UK housebuilding industry, and more widely within the construction industry, offers a potentially rich variety of research opportunities, it is important to recognise that it is a very challenging research arena. While slavery is illegal in the vast majority of jurisdictions, it can also be a lucrative economic activity, and those individuals and organisations involved in

modern slavery, human trafficking and bonded labour, will generally do all they can to hide, and maintain the secrecy of, their activities. Researchers who look to conduct primary research into modern slavery activities may be placing themselves, possibly their research colleagues, and those who participate in such research, in serious personal danger. Problems, and tactics designed to minimise such problems, are rarely addressed in the research literature but they may curtail many potentially promising modern slavery research questions. At the same time, researchers may face a range of ethical issues, not least researchers' responsibilities to those who participate in their research. More generally, there are some guidelines for social science researchers looking to pursue research into hidden activities (e.g. Ellard-Gray et al. 2015), but researching modern slavery within the housebuilding industry seems fraught with difficulties and dangers.

That said, on the one hand, the current authors would recommend a more detailed and wide-ranging empirically based research enquiry into the impact of housebuilding companies' modern slavery statements on modern slavery within their operations. On the other hand, a number of more general research opportunities into corporate approaches to modern slavery within the housebuilding industry can be identified. Here, research investigations might profitably explore the ways in which a wider range of housebuilding companies address the issue of modern slavery. Such work could include large scale questionnaire surveys of, as well as personal interviews and focus group meetings with, senior housebuilding company executives to learn how a range of companies have developed, and continually look to strengthen, their policies on modern slavery. Such research agendas may also explore if, and how, employees, customers, suppliers, governments, and law enforcement agencies are involved in the policy development process. In addition, such research into modern slavery within the housebuilding industry may help to both to test, and to illuminate, theoretical approaches to modern slavery, and perhaps more importantly, help to answer the call by Gold et al. (2015) for new theory development to facilitate the understanding of modern slavery.

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