# SDG commentary: economic services for work and growth for all humans

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to address United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs) 8 and 9 from a service perspective. SDG 8 is a call to improve the dignity of service work by enhancing wages, working conditions and development opportunities while SDG 9 calls upon nations to construct resilient infrastructures, promote inclusivity and sustainability and foster innovation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study uses a bibliometric review to extract important themes from a variety of scholarly journals.

**Findings** – Researchers tend to investigate policy-level topics, such as national and international standards related to working conditions, while ignoring the experiences or well-being of workers occupying marginalized and low-opportunity roles in service organizations. Service researchers, educators and practitioners must collaborate to improve the state of service industries by conducting participatory action research, promoting grassroots organizing/advocacy, implementing digitized customer service and addressing workforce soft skills deficiencies.

**Research limitations/implications** – The authors consider how service work can be transformed into respectable employment and present four specific ways nations can enhance their service industries.

**Practical implications** – Economic planners can view SDGs 8 and 9 as a framework for understanding and promoting the well-being of service employees and accelerating the productivity and innovation levels of the service sector.

**Originality/value** – The United Nations' SDGs are examined from a services perspective, which increases their significance in service-dominated economies.

**Keywords** Conceptual, Customer service, Digital, Digitization, Service innovation, Technology and service, SDG 8, SDG 9, Decent work, Industry, Innovation and infrastructure

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

The United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals (SDGs) are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that by 2030, all people live in peace and prosperity (United Nations, 2023a). While the SDGs were conceptualized broadly, the *Journal of Services of Marketing* and ServCollab (www.servcollab.org/) combined the UN SDGs into seven service research themes, as shown in Figure 1. This commentary addresses Service Research Theme 4, which corresponds to SDG 8 (promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all) and SDG 9 (build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation).

## Sustainable development goals overview

At the heart of SDG 8 is the concept of "decent work," which is defined as:

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Opportunities for everyone to obtain work that is productive and provides a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, and improved opportunities for personal development and social integration (United Nations, 2023c).

Specifically, the International Labor Organization (International Labour Organization, 2023) considers work as decent when workers are:

- paid fair wages;
- provided secure employment;
- offered safe working conditions;
- receive social protection, such as insurance and benefits, for workers and their families; and
- have access to personal development and opportunities to collectively organize.

While SDG 8 places emphasis on the individual, SDG 9 directs its attention toward macroenvironmental variables that foster economic development. Specifically, SDG 9 asserts that by fostering economic growth through investments in manufacturing, technological infrastructure and research and development (R&D), individuals from all countries, including those residing in the least developed countries (LDCs), will attain an improved or elevated quality of life (United Nations, 2023c). Both SDGs 8 and 9 are centered on addressing the

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**Figure 1** Service research themes



**Source:** Russell-Bennett *et al.* (2024)

persistent disparities in economic investments that have resulted in the exclusion of certain segments of society from attaining a satisfactory standard of living, meaningful employment and economic opportunities in different regions around the globe. As the Secretary General of the UN recently stated:

> Progress on more than 50 per cent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; on 30 per cent, it has stalled or gone into reverse (United Nations, 2023b; p. 2).

This statement heightens the urgency for tackling the issues highlighted by the UN SDGs. In this essay, the authors argue in favor of service scholarship as a catalyst for the promotion of decent work, particularly in regions where individuals face limited access to meaningful and impactful job and economic prospects.

## Sustainable development goals and ServCollab's goals

The present analysis aligns with the overarching objective of ServCollab, which is to "serve humanity through research collaborations that catalyze reducing suffering, improving well-being and enabling well-becoming (see https://www.servcollab. org; Fisk *et al.*, 2020). Through efforts aimed at enhancing the caliber of service work and fostering innovation within the service sector, scholars can contribute to the advancement of human and social well-being while also fostering the realization that individual and national prosperity are linked to service industries.

In the next sections, we will discuss whether service employment may be deemed decent work, particularly in the context of LDC. We argue that, in comparison to service employees in industrialized or developed countries, workers in LDCs are disproportionately disadvantaged by inadequate economic infrastructure and inadequate safeguards. As a result, we next address how service sectors might increase their efficiency and output. We finish by suggesting several research topics that should spark innovative theoretical and humanistic investigations.

## Service research and sustainable development goals

### Addressing United Nations sustainable development goal 8: service work as decent work

The service sector plays a leading role in the global economy in terms of promoting economic growth, development and employment (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the growing prevalence of digital technological services, such as financial, medical, education, entertainment and communication mobile applications, has led to a discernible impact on economic growth as well as promoting the well-being of individuals and communities, especially within developing and least developed nations (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2020). However, frontline employees (FLEs) who are often the lynchpins of service delivery frequently assume roles that are characterized by physical and psychological difficulties (Hwang *et al.*, 2022; Voorhees *et al.*, 2020) such as perceived low social status and stigmatization (Kreiner *et al.*, 2022), and an escalating risk of being replaced by technological advancements (Frey and Osborne, 2017). Moreover, public services are shrinking due to the increase in privatization in developed and emerging economies, reducing these workers' access to benefits and security beyond those afforded by mostly low-wage and precarious employment (Lobao *et al.*, 2018). Finally, in non-Western, nonindustrialized, lesser developed or nondemocratic societies, and indeed everywhere around the world, service workers commonly have substantial challenges related to their everyday survival, frequently putting their lives at stake to sustain their means of living in low-skilled service jobs (Hossain, 2021).

It is noteworthy that a considerable number of service researchers in Western countries who adhere to the transformative service research paradigm (TSR) are currently advocating to create "uplifting changes and improvements in the well-being of consumer entities: individuals (consumers and employees), communities and the ecosystem" (Anderson *et al.*, 2013, p. 3).

TSR research studies typically examine how consumers who are physically, socially or mentally vulnerable interact in the marketplace and how businesses may help them realize maximum value. However, TSR investigations into the working circumstances of service employees in economically developing nations or the "global south" are rare. We consider this disregard for worker well-being, especially for those working in service industries, to be a serious issue and intend to use this article as a first step in making up for this shortcoming. We specifically advocate decent work as a crucial area of focus for FLE-related scholarship and policy, particularly in underinvested sectors and in least developed nations.

## Decent work

Workers' perspectives of decent employment are shaped by their experiences with marginalization, discrimination, exclusion or economic restrictions. According to Duffy *et al.* (2016), employees who face marginalization, characterized by factors such as low social status and limited opportunities for self-expression, along with economic constraints like restricted job availability and low wages, tend to perceive themselves as having diminished levels of volition or agency in relation to their employment and career prospects. Additionally, these individuals often exhibit limited career adaptability. Consequently, many service employees equate their sense of work fulfillment (i.e. job satisfaction) as the extent to which employment helps them meet their survival, social connection and self-determination needs, which are all linked to personal well-being (Blustein *et al.*, 2019). Both societal and organizational factors have a substantial impact on decent work (Blustein *et al.*, 2019). Government measures relating to employment development and worker rights (e.g. collective bargaining, safety standards, anti-discrimination laws) might, for example, create a climate conducive to decent work (International Labour Organization, 2023). Similarly, organizational policies that provide physical and psychological safety, enough rest opportunities, work-family balance, job stability, equal compensation and access to health care can support decent work.

To determine the nature and structure of the academic literature related to decent work, we conducted a search of all peer-reviewed articles published in business and management, social sciences and psychology journals in the Scopus database using the author specified keyword "decent work." Our search revealed 264 articles (see Appendix 1) published between the years 2000–2022 in 26 journals spanning the disciplines of labor relations (e.g. *International Labor Review, Journal of Industrial Relations*), vocational psychology (*Journal of Vocational Behavior, Frontiers in Psychology*) and career counseling (e.g. *Journal of Career Assessment, Journal of Career Development*). It should be noted that journals from the service discipline – except for one journal from an adjacent field (i.e. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*) – did not contribute a single article to this literature. This is not to suggest that service researchers do not investigate decent work; rather, decent work as a construct does not merit enough importance to be included in the list of author-supplied keywords within the services marketing and management disciplines. In terms of this literature's description, we discovered a substantial increase in the annual production of articles connected to decent work, with 189 (72%) publications produced in the past four years (2018–2022) alone (see Figure 2). A wordmap of the keywords

used in this research is shown in Figure 3. The most frequent keywords include "marginalization," "work volition," "sustainable development" and "employment," among others.
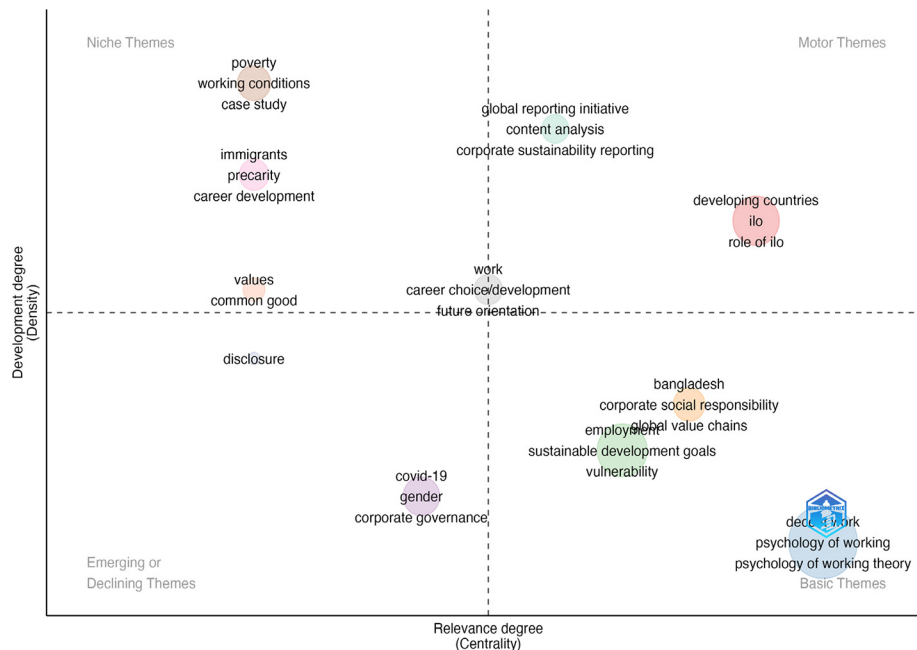
Next, we systematically examined the thematic evolution of keywords using a keyword co-occurrence matrix and plotted the centrality (importance of the keywords) and density (a measure of the keyword's development over time) of the keywords in a strategic diagram (Figure 4; Cahlik, 2000; Cobo *et al.*, 2011). Motor themes (high centrality/high density) represent keywords that are most developed and important in the literature. In contrast, emerging/declining themes (low centrality/low importance) are weakly developed, either because of novelty or due to limited interest from researchers. Niche themes (low centrality/high density) are isolated in the sense that the component keywords are strongly linked with each other but not connected to wider themes; and basic themes (high centrality/low density) are widespread, but their constituent keywords are weakly connected to each other.

The literature focuses on two important motor themes: the role of the International Labor Organization in encouraging decent employment, particularly in developing countries, and corporate sustainability reporting. According to the interpretation of the main theme quadrant, there are three well-developed – but mutually disconnected – themes of sustainable development goals, corporate social responsibility (CSR) in developing countries and work psychology (Duffy *et al.*, 2016). The working conditions of employees in high-poverty environments and the careers of immigrants are examples of niche themes with high levels of density or coherence but limited interrelationships with other themes. Finally, concerns of gender, COVID-19 and corporate governance are among the themes in the low centrality – low-density quadrant that represents either developing (but not yet fully established) themes or waning interest.

Taking all four quadrants into account, our "big picture" reading of the decent work literature indicates a strong interest among researchers in policy-level topics such as national and international standards related to working conditions, as well as organizational-level sustainability and CSR initiatives; and a lower level of interest in the experiences or well-being of workers (particularly immigrants, minorities/women and the poor) occupying marginalized and low-opportunity positions. The latter observation is in response to a recent call to:

> [...] prioritize human life and dignity for both consumers and providers, particularly those representing disadvantaged populations (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, people with disabilities, the bottom of the pyramid, and refugees) (Field *et al.*, 2021; p. 467).

Given the current state of the literature, we believe that the time has come for service researchers to address the issues of decent work for FLEs at both the policy and lived experience levels (Trischler and Charles, 2019) and that addressing UN SDG 8 through transformative societal and organizational policies and practices will catalyze decent work. While inequalities in access to decent employment and economic opportunity exist in economically developed countries, workers in LDCs are disproportionately impacted by a lack of economic infrastructure and, in many cases, legislative safeguards that further limit any sense of work and life quality. Therefore, we move on to UN SDG 9, which aims to expand economic investments – particularly in LDCs –to foster technical

**Figure 2** Annual production of articles related to decent work



**Source:** Authors' own work

**Figure 3** Wordmap of keywords associated with articles related to decent work



**Source:** Authors' own work

progress, innovation through R&D and economic growth for all.

**Addressing United Nations sustainable development goal 9: economic opportunity and investments in least developed countries**

The UN SDG 9 mission is to construct resilient infrastructure, promote equitable and sustainable industrialization and support innovation, with a special emphasis on LDCs. Using the keywords "("least developed countries" OR "developing nations" OR "emergent nations") AND ("service") AND ("work*" OR employ*), we conducted a search of all peer-reviewed articles published in business and management, social sciences and psychology journals in the Scopus database relating to service work and employment in LDC's. Our search yielded $n = 134$ articles (see Appendix 2) with these keywords published between 2000 and 2022.

**Figure 4** Thematic map of keywords related to decent work



**Source:** Authors' own work

We discovered a significant range of heterogeneity in the publications that published these studies. While the interdisciplinary journals *Sustainability* and *Social Science* and *Medicine* led the pack with three articles each, the overall number of journals publishing research relevant to service work and employment in LDCs numbered 123. This reveals the literature's absence of a unifying intellectual structure. A methodological paper (Hair *et al.*, 2009 – cited 18 times) was the most cited source in this database. In line with the literature on decent employment, we discovered a considerable increase in the annual production of papers relevant to service work in LDCs, with 61 (50%) publications published within the past four years (2018–2022; see Figure 5). Figure 6 shows a wordmap of the keywords used in this literature. After omitting direct references to key terms such as "poor nations," the most often used keywords include "sustainability," "Total Quality Management" and "e-government," among others. These keywords reflect a focus within this literature on improving the quality and efficiency of services, especially those provided by the government; as well as efforts to increase sustainability in business practices.

We see this dispersed nature of the literature as a potential opportunity for service scholars to bring their theoretical and methodological rigor to develop strong intellectual foundations for future research without losing sight of the focus on designing resilient and sustainable service systems (Ostrom *et al.*, 2021; Field *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, we believe that, in accordance with SDG 9, decent work will lay the groundwork for the development of resilient infrastructure, sustainable industry and innovation. This is because long-term economic success necessitates a workforce that is motivated, secure and resilient. In the next part, we propose four novel and creative approaches that scholars and practitioners can use to improve and strengthen their service businesses.

## Advancing scholarship and practice for decent work and economic growth

### Use participatory action research

The participatory action research (PAR) paradigm deviates from conventional research approaches, wherein participants are typically perceived as passive providers of data, and policymakers are seen as consumers of findings that may or may not be translated into actions that positively impact the social system in which the participants are situated. Further, theory development and testing take place within the context of practical application and aims at systems-change democratically from within, as opposed to from outside (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Thus, as opposed to the dominant paradigm, which is hierarchical and empowers only a few specialists and managers, PAR is a "systematic approach that seeks knowledge for social action" that involves participants "throughout the research process across problem identification, design, data collection, analysis, and application of the research findings" (Ozanne and Saatcioglu, 2008, p. 424).

We view PAR as a research paradigm that is particularly relevant to the scholarship of decent work on FSEs for three key reasons. First, PAR is a very efficient way to bridge the gap between science and practice because theory testing is entwined with interventions that are relevant (and indeed, designed by) the people who are most likely to be affected by an outcome. For example, service employees seeking to improve their working conditions and presented with the opportunity to make evidence-based changes, are likely to be vested in designing interventions that relate to their experiences at work, and that are effective in fostering well-being. Second, PAR challenges researchers to be better students and teachers, thereby serving as a developmental experience for everyone who is involved. For instance, researchers might teach rigorous

**Figure 5** Annual production of articles related to service work in LDCs



**Source:** Authors' own work

**Figure 6** Wordmap of keywords associated with articles related to service work in LDCs



**Source:** Authors' own work

data collection and analysis methods to the participants while learning more about their grounded experiences and tacit knowledge related to the efficacy of various interventions. Third, PAR is consistent with responsible research in business and management that is oriented toward the solution of real-world "wicked" problems with a focus on rigor and relevance and conducted with integrity and respect for human rights (Tsui, 2022).

*Promote grassroots organizing and advocacy*

Consistent with PAR, there is a need for services researchers to better understand how workers embedded within marginalizing and oppressive social systems, including commercial organizations, may act as agents of change. Most theorization of change within the business literature is based on the assumptions of top-down leadership-driven initiatives and resistance to change from employees lower in the power structure (Kotter, 1995). While PAR challenges the sacrosanct assumption of context-free science, we question the validity of the notion that leaders occupying the apexes of organizational power routinely make decisions that are beneficial for lower status individuals who are experiencing marginalization and economic constraints. We suggest a closer look at grassroots social activism wherein low status groups, referring to people who lack full access to institutionalized channels of influence, engage in collective action to remedy a perceived social problem, or to promote or counter changes to the existing social order (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016).

Social movement theories highlight key factors that can be implicated in the creation, growth and maintenance of grassroots activism. Typically, these movements begin with the notion of relative depravation – that some social groups are being denied opportunities available to others; are sparked by precipitating incidents; use resources such as publicity, people and money to demand redressal; receive external support from allies and advocates; and flourish as long as public opinion remains with them (McAdam *et al.*, 1988; Smelser, 1965). Grassroots activists might persuade and educate individuals in power to adopt new practices (e.g. providing better pay and working condition), delegitimize the status quo by providing evidence of the negative impact or irrationality of current practices (e.g. demonstrate the consequences of pay disparity or lack of safety) or create public pressure to pressure the organization to change (e.g. through strikes, sit-ins and boycotts; Briscoe and Gupta, 2016).

We believe that grassroots social activism can be a critical force in the creation of decent work. From the perspective of service researchers, we see the value of incorporating social movement theories and other models of grassroots activism into our theoretical repertoire, especially as social media is becoming a vehicle for rapid mobilization and diffusion of information. We also urge service researchers to leverage social network analysis, ethnographic techniques and machine learning based analyses of social media data to better understand how social movements emerge to promote decent work and how they grow or decline over time.

*Implement digitized customer service*

As previously discussed, many service industries have developed a notorious reputation as low-wage and low-skill occupations, particularly in the tourism, food/beverage and retail service sectors (Rydzik and Kissoon, 2022). On the one hand, a number of these accusations against the service industries are legitimate. On the other hand, we argue that the global digitization of customer service benefits not only businesses but also FLEs by limiting their social interaction with customers. We put forth that the term "digitization of customer service" refers to the method by which traditional customer service is changed into a digital one. This means that

organizational support is provided to customers via online mediums, including mobile applications, social networking, instant messaging and chatbots or mediums using digital or computerized devices such as self-service machines, phones and robots. The digitization of customer service allows businesses to provide consistent, personalized service that addresses consumer concerns and needs in digital, rather than physical, contexts or so-called "servicescapes" (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017).

To date, researchers have primarily investigated digitized customer service from the organizational perspective as having several advantages for businesses, including increased efficiency and customer responsiveness, decreased expenses and an enhanced customer experience, primarily in major service industries confronting labor shortages, such as hospitality (Morosan and Bowen, 2022). We suggest that digitized customer service may also promote decent work by reducing opportunities for customer incivilty as interactions between customers and digital technologies such as chatbots, mobile applications and robotics become more prevalent. Further, when employees interact with customers over online mediums, opportunities for physical violence are diminished while also permitting both parties with easy exit strategies, namely, selecting the exit option.

This is not to discount the "dark side" of digital technologies, such as online incivility and malintent from customers, organizations or governments (Bacile, 2020; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2020); and the elimination of service roles occupied by low-skilled, younger-aged and vulnerable populations (Lloyd and Payne, 2022). Instead, we suggest that many "dirty" and nondecent jobs are best to be replaced by digital technologies, while others can be enhanced through the use of a carefully considered digital infrastructure. For instance, researchers may explore the role of service design, including elements in the virtual and built servicescapes, in facilitating decent work. Service touchpoints that are particularly susceptible to fatigue, lack of safety and incivility can be transformed into virtual "cyberscapes," in contrast to physical "servicescapes" (Russell-Bennett and Rosenbaum, 2022), while employee touchpoints could be used to add value to customers and provide employees with opportunities for meaningfulness and engagement.

*Address soft skills deficiencies*

In addition to essential business competencies, business educators and career service personnel in higher education have long advocated for graduates to acquire soft skills (Jones *et al.*, 2017) consisting of verbal communication, listening and mental agility and are pursued by organizations as essential skills for new hires and advancing employees through corporate leadership (Gonzales, 2018). Given that many service interactions are also social interactions, service providers, including FLEs and professional service employees, must possess skills such as communication, innovation, teamwork, adaptability, resilience, time management, organization, self-motivation, ability to work under pressure, critical thinking and problem-solving and organizational ability. Indeed, we argue that soft skills enable service providers to not only master their professions but also engage in productive social interactions with customers and coworkers. As employees gain proficiency in soft skills, service work becomes increasingly respectable.

As the recent COVID-19 pandemic illustrated, the immediate loss of social interaction with others in built environments (e.g. schools, shopping centers, fitness centers and public transportation) and forced lockdowns caused many – including adolescents to suffer from anxiety, depression and eating disorders. As these adolescents, who spent a portion of their high school or college years isolated from their peers, service organizations are realizing that their collaboration and communication skills are inferior to those of previous cohorts and have less confidence when performing basic tasks such as giving presentations and participating in meetings (Gonzalez, 2023). Further, excessive internet use among adolescents and young adults can negatively impact their communication skills and promote difficulties in emotion regulation (Özer *et al.*, 2023). Thus, service organizations will be faced with a workforce deficient in soft skills; consequently, their ability to provide quality service to their customers, patients, visitors, patrons, etc., will suffer.

This discussion leads us to assert that both educators and practitioners must recognize the significance of soft-skills training in current business education and training. In addition to being essential for an employee's professional development, soft skills in business contribute to increased productivity, effective management of project uncertainty and employee performance (Riley and Nicewicz, 2022). The result of soft skills training in business curriculum and employee development will be improved service industry performance and employee well-being. That is, as employees master soft skills, service work increasingly becomes "decent work."

## Research agenda for service research and sustainable development goals

We believe that numerous research opportunities exist for investigations into SDGs 8 and 9 and encourage researchers to use humanistic, descriptive research methods to investigate complex or unique cases (Perry, 2000), such as the current state of service work or innovation in the service industries, for application in additional contexts. For instance, service researchers may wish to investigate environments that provide service employees with a high standard of living, competitive wages and favorable working conditions. Also, researchers may wish to examine service organizations that have made significant contributions to their respective industries through innovation, customer-centric approaches and reimagining traditional business models. In both instances, some best practices may be applicable at a global level.

It should be noted that while our commentary does not explicitly mention the issue of overshooting the ecological ceiling through development, i.e. how reinforcing the social foundations of humanity can create instabilities in the ecological ceiling (e.g. through global warming), our recommendations to address SDGs 8 and 9 is rooted in an ecosystems perspective (Raworth, 2017; Raworth, 2018). That is, we see environmental justice as a form of social justice and view grassroots interventions to address decent and sustainable work as not in contradiction with environmental sustainability. Indeed, the "Chipko" and "Save the Naramada" movements in India were clearly rooted in preserving natural resources to preserve the ecology of the regions and provide a means of livelihood for subsistence farmers and tribals living in conjunction with their natural environments (Mallick, 2021).

We encourage service researchers to address the following research questions, as doing so will improve consumer and national well-being; these are:

*RQ1.* If service organizations actively involve consumers or community members in the research process and engage them in identifying their needs and concerns, how will services, service delivery, service design or service processes change?

*RQ2.* By actively involving marginalized or underserved consumer groups in the research process, service organizations can develop strategies to reduce disparities and promote social justice. How would strategies change with this approach?

*RQ3.* Does public pressure generated through social media and online activism influence service organizations to address issues highlighted by grassroots campaigns, such as wage disparities and workplace discrimination? If so, which campaigns are successful and why?

*RQ4.* Grassroots movements, like the #MeToo movement and Black Lives Matter, have drawn attention to issues of racial and gender discrimination, harassment and inequality in various service industries, including entertainment, hospitality and technology. However, does attention equate to managerially relevant outcomes, such as customer satisfaction or share price? Can organizations ignore these movements? When must senior management address them?

*RQ5.* To what extent do AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants reduce the workload on employees, and how is employee satisfaction impacted?

*RQ6.* If FLEs are able to interact with customers through multiple digital channels, such as e-mail, chat, social media and mobile apps, does their perceptions of work–life balance change?

*RQ7.* Does customer incivility lessen via digital channels? Or does it morph into other forms of stigmatization?

*RQ8.* To what extent does soft-skills training improve service workers' adaptability and ability to handle challenging or unexpected customer situations, and how does this influence customer complaints and service recovery?

*RQ9.* What are the key soft skills (e.g. empathy, active listening, conflict resolution) that are most positively affected by training, and how do they contribute to improved customer interactions and service quality?

*RQ10.* "How can organizational policies and practices be redesigned to enhance the dignity, well-being, and job satisfaction of service workers while simultaneously improving service quality and customer satisfaction?"

## Conclusion

This commentary is intended to address SDGs 8 and 9 of the UN. By 2030, all women and men must have access to full and productive employment as well as decent work, according to SDG 8. SDG 9 exhorts countries to make investments in infrastructure and innovation to spur economic development. We concluded that, generally speaking, service work is not decent employment, especially in developing and least-developed countries, by looking at SDGs 8 and 9 from the perspective of the service industries, as both service organizations and scholars have looked askance at the welfare of FLEs. Further, we addressed SDG 9 by purporting four ways that academicians and practitioners can foster a nation's service industries; these are use participatory research; promote grassroots organizing and advocacy; implement digitized customer service and address soft skills deficiencies among junior employees.

The SDGs are a call to action to eradicate poverty, safeguard the environment and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. Sadly, service industries have a history of fostering exclusion and providing low compensation and few opportunities for advancement (Fisk *et al.*, 2018). This commentary serves as a reminder that, according to the guidelines of the International Labor Organization, service labor does not generally constitute as decent work. Despite this reality, this commentary outlines ways in which academics and practitioners can collaborate to resolve this situation and increase the respectability of service work worldwide.

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