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EDITORIAL

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The Global Disappearance of Decent Work? Precarity, Exploitation, and Work-Based Harms in the Neoliberal Era

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Abstract

This thematic issue offers an international perspective on precarious work and the social harms generated by such work. In the following introduction, we contextualise these trends in relation to entrenched neoliberal policy, rising contractual insecurity, the proliferation of borders, and other forms of institutional discrimination and inequality. We distinguish between formal contractual insecurity and the subjective experiences of precarity, interrogate the types of harms that accompany precarious work, and set out a social justice perspective for an engaged critique of precarious work. The collection is truly global in its scope, encompassing case studies from Bangladesh, China, Czechia, Ecuador, Finland, Italy, India, Jordan, Latvia, and Spain. These case studies draw out the diverse contexts for rising precarity, ranging from post-soviet, post-socialist, and neoliberal transitions to post-colonial and neocolonial contexts, examining how precarity is shaped by and interacts with divisions of ethnicity, migration status, gender, sexuality, and class. This thematic issue arises out of the work of the (In)Justice International Collective and is dedicated to the organization's founder, Dr. Simon Prideaux, who passed away in 2023.

Keywords

contractual insecurity; globalisation; multiplication of labour; neoliberalism; precarious work; precarity; social harms

1. Introduction

This thematic issue brings together a series of articles on the nature of "global precarity" in work and employment—a seemingly universal phenomenon manifested in a variety of forms and producing a diversity of consequences (Shin et al., 2023). Processes regarding the global commodification of labour have opened up a discussion about the nature and constitution of precarity for workers around the world (Shin et al., 2023), firstly, in terms of its framing—low-wages, insecure contracts, absence of training and progression, lack of status, and exposure to a range of work-based harms (Lloyd, 2021; Scott, 2018)—and secondly regarding the nature of the social harm associated with and caused by work-based precarity. How can we conceptualise the physical, psychological, economic, and cultural impacts (Canning & Tombs, 2021) of precarious work?

These explorations are even more pertinent in the context of accelerating global labour commodification and historically entrenched neoliberal employment policy. Recent years have seen a stripping away of legislative and regulatory protections, increasingly rendering populations as insecure, "precarious," and disposable (Standing, 2011). We see globally that this ranges from migrants and ethnic minorities—where varying citizenship statuses and structural racism may relegate them to the fringes of the labour market (Anderson, 2010)—to young people, who may also face ineligibility for support mechanisms and a lack of opportunities in increasingly fractured and fragmented transitions to work (Formby, 2023; MacDonald & Marsh, 2005). Moreover, a lack of appropriate social policy responses to contemporary global challenges including the financial crisis of 2008 onwards, Covid-19, and post-pandemic inflationary pressures exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine, ongoing neo-colonialism, and climate change, have left increasing numbers of workers facing uncertain futures.

Yet, we acknowledge that there is nothing new about "precarity." Much of the framing of the so-called "standard employment contract" fails to acknowledge that the security that accompanied the shift to social democracy in the colonial and neocolonial societies of the Global North persisted only for a few short decades in the aftermath of the Second World War and was never available to workers in the Global South, or to certain categories of workers in the metropoles (Hardy, 2021; Munck, 2013). More specifically, women and migrants were largely excluded from such contractual provision and social security support. Nevertheless, the diffusion of neoliberal politics centred on deregulation, privatisation, and "responsibilisation" has, to a significant degree, unpicked the security that existed for some workers in the Global North while leading (in combination with neo-colonialism) to greater informalisation, hyper-exploitation, and outward migration in the Global South (Standing, 2011).

In part this is a consequence of neoliberal structural adjustment (Harvey, 2005), capital restructuring, deregulation of labour markets and employment contracts (Lloyd, 2019), and attacks on organised labour (Gallas, 2015). But it is also linked to a proliferation of borders as an aspect of contemporary globalisation. These borders serve as a method of social division and *multiplication* (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), carving up social and political space, while multiplying differences between categories of workers (citizen, guestworker, undocumented migrant), rendering them more vulnerable to exploitation and intensifying their rhythms and conditions of work. The consequent growth of global-work-based precarity has disproportionately exposed younger, ethnic minority, migrant, and working-class people to increasing insecurity, relegated to "gig work" or "bogus self-employment," zero-hour and fixed-term contracts, short-term agency work or "off

the books" employment within the informal or illegal economy (Formby, 2023; Shildrick et al., 2012; Wood, 2020).

There is also a need to consider that even where the trend towards increasing precarity is open to debate, in the strict sense of an increasing number of insecure and atypical contracts (Choonara, 2020), the wider gamut of neoliberal policies that are repressing wages, intensifying workloads, tearing up social security and fuelling attacks on trade unions are generating widespread *feelings* of precarity (Alberti et al., 2018, p. 449). This directs us towards an understanding of precariousness as lived experience, with precarity indicating the differential vulnerabilities and inequalities in social protection that groups of workers face (Millar, 2017).

In such a context, reflecting on the lived experience of precarity (linked to diverse and global labour markets), considering experiences of youth, ethnicity and migration status, gender and sexuality, disability, and class is integral. Such analyses are connected to questions of political economy, globalisation and "neoliberal statecraft" (Wacquant, 2009), the presence or absence of welfare systems that support people out of and into work (Jeffery et al., 2018), the class composition of workforces (Jeffery et al., in press), the freedom to operate and vitality (or otherwise) of labour movements that are capable of organising, supporting, and defending workers (Holgate, 2021), the role of technology in facilitating or inhibiting different forms of work (Delfanti, 2021), and the significance of culture and ideology in reproducing various workplace regimes.

Moreover, there is a need to recognise that the failure to address work-based "harms" is a matter of social injustice. As Pemberton (2016, p. 1) articulates, if social harms are "entirely preventable, a product of social relations that could be organised very differently to meet the needs of the many and not just the few"—the universal nature of work-based precarity (and associated harms that disproportionately impact underrepresented communities) raises the question of why and how employment and welfare regimes ignore and displace work-based harms.

2. The Thematic Issue

This collection of articles is deeply indebted to our friend and colleague Dr Simon Prideaux and his commitment to developing a global platform for raising and interrogating questions of social justice through the (In)Justice International network ((In)Justice International, 2023; Prideaux et al., 2023). Simon was a critical social scientist, whose interventions on disability policy (Prideaux et al., 2009), state crime (Monaghan & Prideaux, 2016), and political ideology (Prideaux, 2005) have had a significant impact across a range of academic disciplines. (In)Justice International, the organisation he helped create, has brought together social justice academics, activists, and practitioners from around the world to create a platform for social change, reflecting Simon's commitment as an academic activist seeking both utopian and practical interventions at global, national, and local scales. As a mentor, teacher, and researcher, Simon was inspired by his commitment to social justice—and his concomitant anger at forms of social injustice that undercut human dignity and fairness. He is deeply missed.

This thematic issue on the global disappearance of decent work explores themes of precarity and exploitation, labour conditions, globalization, policy and regulation, and agency and resistance. It also covers many of the topics that Simon advocated and fought for, including the rights of migrant workers, minoritised

ethnicities, the working class, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and all of those marginalised by the neoliberal assault.

The thematic issue is loosely organised into four sections: legal and political constructions of precarious work; subjective experiences of precarious work; ethnicity and migration in precarious work; and gender and sexuality in precarious work. However, we note that these are somewhat arbitrary distinctions, and most of the themes we have discussed above crosscut the entire collection (especially the way that those who are precarit*ised* often belong to minoritised ethnicities and are internal and transnational migrants).

Firstly, Seikkula's (2024) article explores the issue of precarious labour in the Finnish wild berry industry, focusing on the socio-legal aspects that facilitate short-term migration, primarily from Thailand, for the berry picking season. Since the initial recruitment of Thai citizens in 2005 to pick forest berries for the Finnish industry, the sector has increasingly relied on migrant labour. However, these pickers operate in a regulatory grey area, as they are categorized outside of Finland's labour laws and are thus an example of how border regimes produce precarious labour (Anderson, 2010; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). The article examines how this situation—where berry picking occurs without labour rights—has been justified at a policy level.

Lukeš Rybanská and Čada (2024) continue the discussion of legal and political constructions of precarious work. They explore the portrayal of self-employment in public policy discussions in Czechia, focusing on how political figures define self-employment and the moral implications of these definitions. Utilising critical discourse analysis and examining transcripts of parliamentary debates from 2021 to 2023, the authors uncover how lawmakers attach economic and moral meanings to the self-employed, depicting them as alternatively vulnerable (Henley, 2023), entrepreneurial (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018) or deviant. These significations inform divergent policies aimed at supporting, encouraging, or regulating self-employment.

The following two articles centre on the subjective experiences of self-employment. In the first, Ronde (2024) looks at the insecurity of labour conditions within the humanitarian sector in Jordan. Drawing on a year of fieldwork in Amman, the capital city, and interviews with 39 aid professionals, she examines the experiences of national and international workers facing precarious employment situations. Embracing perspectives from feminist and decolonial scholars, the study views labour's entanglement with broader life spheres and explores precarity through an emotional lens (Ahmed, 2004). The article argues that the structural nature of this work engenders precarious subjectivities, manifested in feelings of stagnation, exhaustion, and paralysis.

Ķešāne and Spuriņa (2024) also explore first-hand experiences of precariousness, in this case in relation to food delivery workers in Riga, Latvia—a nation that has undergone significant neoliberal restructuring since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This article goes beyond the existing research—largely centred on Western Europe and America—that has detailed the temporary nature of gig work, its lack of legal safeguards, and the imposition of algorithmic management. Instead, their article aims to understand why individuals opt for gig work despite its precariousness. Drawing on the distinction between precarity as a condition and precariousness as a subjective experience (Millar, 2017), the study, based on 56 in-depth interviews, develops an innovative typology to account for the full gamut of gig worker experiences, ranging from lifestyle choice to trap.

The following three articles explore how issues of ethnicity and migration interact with precarious work. Wang and Meng (2024) investigate the evolving landscape of employment relations within China's platform economy, amidst a global rise in non-standard employment arrangements. Through interviews with platform company managers and food delivery workers, their research sheds light on the emergence and evolution of precarious employment in post-socialist China. More specifically they explore the various labour arrangements that are applied to the largely internal migrant workforce of food delivery couriers. This leads to the important finding that is also these arrangements—and not simply the presence of algorithmic management—that serves to intensify (or "multiply"; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) the platform couriers' work.

Kalarivayil et al. (2024) also focus on the fate of an internal migrant community, in this case, the so-called Tea tribes of Assam. This refers to the workers from the tribal communities of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa who were originally brought to the tea gardens of Assam as indentured labourers during the colonial period. Despite the post-colonial context, the working conditions of the tea gardens have become more precarious in recent decades as neoliberal reforms have led to under-investment and the driving down of terms and conditions. Utilising a spatialised concept of precarity (Banki, 2013) and aiming to correct for the predominance of Eurocentric analyses of precarity (Munck, 2013), the authors explore issues of tied-housing, wage structure, surveillance, and discrimination to elucidate the contemporary drivers of precarity in the tea gardens.

Célleri's (2024) study contributes to debates around differential inclusion in South–South Migration, and access to labour and social protection through the case study of young Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Ecuador. Despite initially adopting progressive policies in relation to this migrant group, a more restrictive approach has been in effect since 2019, which has created a complex dynamic of differential inclusion (Corrigan, 2014; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Yet rather than understanding the young migrants and refugees as passive victims, the author draws upon the examples of four participants (taken from a larger ethnographic study) to explore their resilience strategies of accessing social provisions whilst coping with informality and irregular status, and the intensification of labour.

The fourth section explores precarity in relation to gender and sexuality. Firstly, Shewly et al. (2024) explore the experiences of precarity among female internal migrant workers in Bangladesh's ready-made garments (RMG) industry. In recent decades, the expansion of the RMG sector has drawn economically disadvantaged rural women away from traditional domestic and agricultural roles. These women, predominantly young and perceived as flexible labourers, are employed on low wages with limited union representation. Their status as "unskilled" workers within a gender-stratified labour market, compounded by socio-cultural power dynamics, constrains their ability to advocate for improved conditions effectively. Through in-depth ethnographic research in Dhaka and Gazipur, the article elucidates the complex interactions between global supply chains, insecure labour conditions, and gender norms (Bhaiya & Wieringa, 2007). It highlights the significant role of socio-cultural power dynamics in shaping the vulnerability experienced by female migrant workers.

Finally, Tomaselli (2024) investigates entangled intersectional experiences of precarity, including but also moving beyond the "big three" axes of inequality—gender, ethnicity, and race (Davis & Zarkov, 2017). More specifically, the article focuses on the challenges faced by women and LGBTQIA+ individuals who are part of ethnic minorities or migrant communities in accessing decent labour conditions. The article highlights how various social factors like age, class, and ethnicity, combine with discrimination and gender-based violence to

produce structural inequality and exploitation in the workplace. Using South Tyrol in Italy and Catalonia in Spain as case studies, both areas characterized by low unemployment rates and high migration, Tomaselli examines the intersectional dynamics at play.

3. Conclusion

Overall, this thematic issue adds to the emergent literature that locates and challenges global manifestations of work-based harms. Our contributions articulate and demonstrate both the extent and depth to which work-based harms impact underrepresented communities, their complex fluidity, and provide insight into welfare and policy responses (even in the context of the evident failures of social policy in most of these cases). We hope this collection helps frame novel and multifaceted understandings of social (in)justice and in-work precarity. Most of all, we hope those understandings provide stimulus to all those seeking to tackle work-based harm and who are fighting injustice and challenging precarity.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Bob Jeffery is a sociologist whose work focuses on class inequalities, work and employment and policing and protest. He has published in journals such as *Sociology*, *Sociological Review*, *Political Studies*, *Criminal Justice Matters* and *Industrial Relations Journal*. He is a member of the (In)Justice International Collective. His current research explores the experiences of low paid and precarious work and prospects for union renewal in so-called "difficult-to-organise" industries. With colleagues, he has recently published a report for Zero Hours Justice exploring the link between precarious contracts and sexual harassment in the hospitality industry.

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ARTICLE

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Socio-Legal Production of the Tourist-Seasonal Labourer for the Finnish Berry Industry

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Abstract

The article investigates the phenomenon of precarious labour within the Finnish wild berry industry, focusing on the socio-legal dimensions that enable short-term "just-in-time" migration, primarily from Thailand, for the berry season. Since the initial 2005 recruitment of Thai citizens to engage in forest berry picking for the Finnish berry industry, the industry has become heavily reliant on migrant labour. At the same time, the pickers' situation exemplifies a case of unregulated labour, as pickers are categorised as a group outside of labour laws in Finland. By asking how this "non-work"—berry picking without labour rights—has repeatedly been justified on a policy level, the article provides a case study that unpacks the creation of a racialised migrant labour force through a statecraft of differential inclusion, in an arrangement regarded to advance rural economies. Empirically, the article draws on an analysis of policy documents through which a particular kind of temporary migration corridor is administered.

Keywords

deregulated labour; differential inclusion; Finland; seasonal migration; unregulated labour; wild berry industry

1. Introduction

"Foreign wild berry pickers pick berries in Finland from July to September/October. The pickers are not entrepreneurs, nor do they have employment contracts with berry purchasers," stated the Finnish employment authority's public service announcement, on August 8 (TE Services, 2019, translation by the author), about the arrangement through which between 2,000 and 4,000 citizens of Thailand travel annually to Finland to forage wild berries that grow uncultivated in the forests. The Finnish wild berry industry is

dependent on migrant labourers, who pick up to 90% of the industry's raw materials. Physically hard and very low-paid, commercial picking is not considered attractive to most people in Finland. Formally, the arrival of the not-entrepreneurs-nor-employee-labourers is arranged through Schengen visas. Given their unregulated labour market status, the pickers are excluded from the protection of Finnish labour laws. This article investigates how such an arrangement has been justified on a policy level in the context of a "heavily regulated social democratic labour market" (Rye & Scott, 2018, p. 7) of a Nordic welfare state.

This article contributes to discussions about precarity and the global division of labour (Hedberg, 2022) by examining the role of the state in advancing precarious, deregulated labour. Importantly, deregulated labour has been identified as one of the central tendencies that contribute to migrants' precarious labour market positions in urban settings (e.g., Wills et al., 2009), and many discussions about gig work in the platform economy revolve around it (e.g., Krzywdzinski & Gerber, 2020; Maury, 2023). Through shifting attention from metropoles and digital platforms to a rural context, the article addresses precarity concerning seasonal migrant labour in a non-timber forestry sector that bears resemblance to European agricultural food production, a realm in which the "loosening and lowering" of labour protections has been characterised as "a race to the bottom" (Rye & Scott, 2018, pp. 7–8). A growing number of seasonal migrant workers take on European fruit and vegetable production tasks, and "seasonal agricultural workers fill jobs shunned by local workers because of the low wages, hardship, long hours and poor living conditions" (Augère-Granier, 2021, p. 6). The article examines one version of this race to the bottom by analysing a case of state-administered "regulated precarity" (see Siegmann et al., 2022). As the following analysis will show, wild berry picking in Finland is formally presented as a special case, even to the extent that its official labour conditions differ from that of neighbouring Sweden (the only other EU country hosting a similar industry; see Axelsson & Hedberg, 2018; Hedberg, 2013, 2021, 2022; Iossa & Selberg, 2022; Krifors, 2020), whose pickers are required to partake in formal employment relationships. Yet, while state-facilitated, non-contractual employment, and the wild berry sector at large, might appear exceptional, this analysis emphasises a broader pattern of legitimising cheap and deregulated migrant labour.

Empirically, the article draws on an analysis of legislative texts and policy documents that define the practice of administering a temporary corridor (Krifors, 2020) for "just-in-time" migration (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) for purposes that serve the Finnish berry industry, and that determine the labour conditions for berry pickers of mainly Thai origin. By answering the question of how the wild berry picking arrangement is facilitated and legitimised in the research material, I address the dynamics of justifying and normalising (Helén & Tapaninen, 2013) cheap and unregulated migrant labour, as well as empirically discuss a topic that has been largely left untouched by previous academic research. The empirical analysis concerns an arrangement in which foraging or picking wild berries is understood as distinct from garden berries (which are subject to different regulations). Hereafter, wild berries will be referred to as just berries, and in the analysed materials, they are also referred to as both forest berries and natural products.

The article is structured as follows: First, I present the theoretical framework of the analysis, which stresses the role of the state in a setting that critical migration studies has characterised as a differential inclusion. Second, I discuss further the context of berry picking in Finland, and then present the analysed material and methods. I proceed to a two-part analysis, one focussed on mobility-related definitions and justifications, and the other on labour-related definitions. Finally, I conclude by arguing that the berry-picking arrangement exemplifies how migrant precarity is actively shaped by state policies, and hence is not an exceptional

aberration. Consequently, the analysis puts forward an exemplary case in which the differentiation function of borders is used deliberately, and amplified in policy-making.

2. Statecraft of Differential Inclusion

A repeated observation in critical migration studies has been that border regimes produce precarious labour (e.g., Anderson, 2010; Rigo, 2011) as conditional, temporary, or lacking legal statuses to increase migrant workers' dependency on their employers, narrow their bargaining power, and limit their access to rights (e.g., Iossa & Selberg, 2022; Könönen, 2018; Wills et al., 2009). One preeminent articulation of this is the concept of differential inclusion (e.g., Mezzadra & Neilson, 2011, 2013) that points to the selective inclusion of migrant workers in a society and its sphere of rights, regardless of their physical presence in the nation-state space. The scholarship on differential inclusion, which has brought to the fore "differentiation within the same legal and political space" (Rigo, 2011, p. 207), also grounds my analysis of the berry-picking arrangement. While the emphasis of many analyses of differential inclusion has been on the "legal production of illegal and deportable subjects" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 132), and the lived experiences conditioned by continuous struggles to secure and/or maintain an authorised status, the case of berry picking underscores how facilitating mobility is an integral part of differential inclusion. By invoking the notion of statecraft of differential inclusion, I scrutinise the particularities of the regulatory space when it comes to berry industry-linked mobility.

Taking into account statecraft of differential inclusion permits scrutiny of the possibility that a deregulated labour market status does not simply co-occur with border governance, but that it can also be a consequence of deliberate continuous processes that produce a regulated precarity (Siegmann et al., 2022). In other words, while it is unquestionable that the various mechanisms of migration governance render those whose mobility is controlled to be a particularly exploitable labour force in a capitalist mode of production, crafting a flexible and informal labour force that serves a particular purpose might be a consequence of intentional policy measures. This links to the important observation by Wills et al. (2009, p. 30), who emphasises that the deregulation of labour relates to an active production of societal divisions that are not (at least completely) beyond the reach of politicians and policymakers. Consequently, a study of the regulatory space (policies stated in legislation as well as in various bureaucratic practices; see Axelsson et al., 2021) allows one to identify the specific mechanisms that instrumentalise certain forms of mobility.

At the same time, statecraft of differential inclusion is interlinked with broader structural phenomena, such as global supply-chain capitalism (Tsing, 2015), a migrant division of labour (Wills et al., 2009), and a form of racial capitalism that constitutes a supposedly "racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation" (Robinson, 1983/2000, p. 26). Furthermore, such structures potentially contribute to naturalising racial/ethnic hierarchies of labour, as Holmes (2012) argues in *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*. In the case of wild berry foraging, in particular, these are likely to be entangled with cultural-contextual elements.

3. Local Berries, Migrant Pickers

"People have always picked berries in Finland" say Pouta et al. (2006, p. 286) when describing the significance of wild berry picking in Finland. Berries that require no cultivation have traditionally been used for human consumption, and hold significant cultural value, for instance, wild berries are featured in several

Finnish colloquialisms and proverbs. Furthermore, the Right of Public Access (the freedom to roam) means everyone can access both publicly—and privately–owned forests, and exercise the right to pick berries, mushrooms, and plants under certain conditions (Tuunanen et al., 2012). It is customary to present the Right of Public Access as an ancient tradition (cf. Pouta et al., 2006), or at least a consuetudinary law whose application has persisted, unchallenged, for centuries (cf. Tuunanen et al., 2012). However, historical research stressing the Right of Public Access as a 20th-century institution has also shown that the framing of berries as an open resource was stabilised at the end of the 19th century, with the justification that "berries could be provided to retailers, export markets, and the evolving berry-refining industries" (La Mela, 2014, p. 285). Today, recreational berry picking remains a somewhat popular (although declining) pastime. Meanwhile, the popularity of commercial picking, particularly for industrial purposes, has faded amongst Finnish households. Turtiainen and Rantanen (2020, p. 62, translation by the author) describe the situation as follows: "The number of Finnish commercial pickers has decreased, among other things, due to ageing and urbanisation, nor has the low price paid for wild berries attracted new commercial pickers." Consequently, Finnish berry-purchasing companies have increasingly resorted to using foreign labour; since the late 1990s, the industry has to some extent relied on pickers from Russia, the Baltic countries, and Ukraine. In 2005, the first pilot group of less than one hundred Thai nationals was invited by one Finnish company emulating a business model already established in Sweden (Hedberg, 2013). In subsequent years, the number of Thai citizens arriving in Finland for berry picking increased steadily, and the industry grew dependent on the Thai labour force. The emergence of the current-scale commercial berry branch in Finland can only be explained by the contribution of Thai labourers (Rantanen & Valkonen, 2011, pp. 8–9). In practice, the Finnish berry-purchasing companies—similar to their Swedish counterparts—rely on profit-driven recruitment chains in Thailand (Eerbeek & Hedberg, 2021) to invite and host short-term labour for the berry season.

While there is considerable scholarly literature about wild berry picking in Sweden, the Finnish field is fledging. Thus far, the involvement of foreign pickers has been described as making the harvesting of berries "more efficient" due to "the fact that foreign (in particular Thai) pickers are hard-working" (Turtiainen & Rantanen, 2020, p. 62, translation by the author). On the one hand, "hard-working" is a racial stereotype, commonly connected to East Asian people (Osanami Törngren et al., 2023, p. 322). On the other hand, Turtiainen and Rantanen (2020, pp. 62–63) also acknowledge that "Thai pickers are motivated more than other groups by the fact that they have invested more money in the picking journey than other groups of foreigners." Since the pickers are compensated by the amount of berries they forage, and they have invested in the costs of overseas travel, the incentive to "work hard" is indeed high. The Finnish media has featured individual pickers' successes, profiling the income they have gained from berry picking (e.g., Vaarama, 2021), but contradictorily, have also repeatedly framed the position of Thai pickers as exploitation (Alho & Helander, 2016, p. 149), similar to descriptions from Sweden (Axelsson & Hedberg, 2018). In 2022, the Supreme Court of Finland sentenced one berry-purchasing entrepreneur to prison for 26 charges of human trafficking, following a police investigation that began in 2016. Later in 2022, the Finnish police announced new criminal investigations concerning human trafficking in the berry branch, and an official misconduct charge against a high-ranking Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (MEAE) official. Another significant indication that the labour conditions leave something to be desired are the claims made by the pickers themselves.

Throughout the time in which Thai seasonal migration has supported the Nordic berry industry's needs, the pickers have spoken up for their rights in several instances. Axelsson and Hedberg (2018) list occasions of protests and strikes in 2009 and 2013 in Sweden, and they also note that returning pickers have demanded

justice and unpaid compensation through public protests in Thailand. In Finland, public awareness increased when the so-called group of 50 berry pickers rose up against their host company, demanding unpaid compensation for berries picked in the 2013 season. Their protest is recorded in journalistic work (e.g., Nikkanen, 2016), and the 50 pickers brought a civil suit against the berry company for unpaid compensation. Ultimately, the administrative court ruled in favour of the company in 2017—the aforementioned 2022 human trafficking verdict resulted from a trafficking investigation, rather than picker-led action against labour conditions. Furthermore, recent journalistic accounts of berry picking conditions, as well as about the debt-bound position of seasonal migrants financing their travel, underscore the persistence of the problems the pickers face (The Isaan Record, 2023). In February 2024, while this article was being finalised, returned migrants in Thailand were organising as The Network of Thai Berry Pickers in Sweden and Finland, making claims to the Thai, Swedish, and Finnish governments (The Reporters, 2024). Importantly, the pickers' organising—and, at least to some extent their contacts with the Nordic authorities—has been facilitated over the years by activists from the Thai diaspora in Finland (United Nations, 2023).

In both Finland and Sweden, the state has also attempted to regulate the position of foreign berry pickers. Even if this article's focus is on the regulatory frameworks in Finland, it is not insignificant to note that the Finnish legislative framework differs from that in Sweden, where pickers are required to have employment contracts. Despite this, Axelsson and Hedberg (2018) describe the situation in Sweden as regime shopping, in which posted workers remain outside of Swedish jurisdiction due to the use of a subcontractor model. The analysis that follows highlights some aspects of the Finnish regulatory framework. To provide an overview of the regulatory measures taken by the government, it's worth noting that in 2014, the MEAE introduced the practice of the Letter of Intent, in which berry-purchasing companies were requested to commit to certain standards in their operations (e.g., to ensure that the pickers are charged only "reasonable recruitment costs"). After the improving position of berry pickers was mentioned in the Government Programme of 2019, Finland enacted the Act on the Legal Status of Foreigners Picking Natural Products, or the so-called Lex Berry, which through a separate statute enshrined in law roughly similar principles to those stated in the Letter of Intent. After the exposure of the suspected official misconduct in the MEAE in 2022, the Ministry revised its stance and proposed to include wild berry pickers in the Seasonal Workers Decree, which would have led to the requirement of contractual employment. However, due to a variety of reasons—some of them relating to legislation techniques—the proposal was not supported by some of the other key ministries. Despite the ongoing development of different regulatory stages, roughly 2,000–4,000 Thai citizens have since arrived on Schengen short-term visas to pick berries for the Finnish berry industry (on issuing visas see Zampagni, 2016). Of the on-average 9,000 visas issued annually by the Finnish Embassy in Bangkok during the last decade, roughly one-third have been issued for berry picking (European Commission, n.d.). An exception to this are the years under Covid-19 restrictions: In 2020 and 2021, the Finnish Embassy in Bangkok issued less than 4,000 visas per year, of which between 2,000 and 3,000 were issued to berry pickers.

4. Analysing Legislative and Administrative Documents

My analysis draws on legislative, policy, and administrative documents that mention the involvement of citizens of Thailand in wild berry picking in Finland. Authorities are obliged to ensure their conduct is in line with legislative documents and authoritative texts, while reports, memos, and recommendations have a more informative role. Some of the documents are publicly available, but others I have obtained through

requests according to the principle of public access to official documents. This has resulted in an archive consisting of approximately 1,000 pages (the number of titles is open to interpretation). All the analysed documents were written in Finnish, hence, the citations provided in the article are my translations.

The earliest documents, dated between 2004 and 2007, bring forth the berry industry's interest in inviting foreign pickers from Thailand to Finland and state the prerequisites for this. Since 2007, distinct reports and recommendations have also been issued in response to observed exploitation in the berry branch. The first governmental report on foreign berry pickers, by a Ministry of the Interior (MOI) coordinated working group in 2007, addresses the issue in response to the distress of a group of Ukrainian students who had come to Finland to pick berries, and were left without the funds to return to their country of origin. In 2009, the Minority Ombudsman—the authority at the time tasked to advance the legal protection of foreigners—stated in their recommendation to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) that attention should be given to the fact that pickers, mainly from Thailand, take the main economic risk in the industry, and consequently, several pickers have ended up in debt because of that. In 2014, an MEAE report identified that multiple actors in both Finland and Thailand benefit from this seasonal migration, stating that "the only one taking on a personal risk is the picker." Consequently, the authoritative documents concerning the pickers' entry to Finland, as well as attempts to regulate the contractual arrangements between pickers and the berry purchasers, to some extent seem to respond to the observed problems. In addition, Thai berry pickers are also mentioned in strategy and other documents concerning the natural products sector, and Finnish food exports. The newest documents in my archive are from spring 2023 when the MFA adjusted the guiding principles for issuing visas to third-country nationals for berry picking.

My analysis of this research material is informed by the methodology of interpretive policy analysis, an approach that underscores how the formation of policies is underpinned by both contextual and sociopolitical understandings. My analysis method is informed by the approach adopted by Helén and Tapaninen (2013) in their study of family reunification-related migration policies. Drawing on analytics of governmentality, they seek to capture how a certain migration policy-related practice is "understood, conceptualized, and reasoned" (Helén & Tapaninen, 2013, p. 154) in practices of migration management. The processual approach they describe also characterises the research at hand: The documents I have analysed capture a dynamic discussion in a contested field. From this, I have identified conceptualisations and reasonings that justify existing practices.

5. A Universal Common and Other Visa Requirements

While there are several examples of agribusinesses that rely on a labour force made "flexible" through illegalisation (e.g., Holmes, 2012), the berry pickers are formally granted a temporary status (comparable to that of a tourist) as they arrive in Finland on Schengen short-term visas. The ground rules for Schengen visas are laid out in the joint European Visa Code (see Zampagni, 2016), but applying the visa policy requires active involvement from the state, that issues the visas. In what follows, I scrutinise the policy documents' justifications for the temporary state-administered just-in-time migration to the requirements for entering the country.

Since 2004, the MFA has issued an annual document guiding Finnish consulates on how to issue visas for foreign nationals for forest/wild berry picking. The guiding documents provide specifications for consular

officials dealing with visa procedures (cf. Zampagni, 2016), but they also specify the legal grounds for issuing visas for berry picking. To begin with, the documents from 2004 and 2005 reveal that Finland has previously issued visas to foreign nationals subject to visa requirements from areas nearby (mainly Russia and Estonia) to pick forest berries. However, the document (2004) also state that berry-purchasing companies have approached the authorities with requests to recruit pickers from abroad, or at least from Thailand (2005), because a sufficient labour force is not available in Finland or areas nearby. In addition, the documents refer to the fact that the Aliens Act exempts certain branches of seasonal work from requiring a residence permit.

At this time, a certain legal provision (Finlex, 2004, 81 §, subsection 1, para. 4) specified that certain fields of seasonal work be exempt from a working right-providing permit. Whether or not this applied to the berry pickers' situation is addressed through multiple documents in conflicting ways. In 2007, the MFA guiding document explicitly named the legal provision as the grounds on which wild berry picking was categorised. Two years later, in 2009, the document stated: "The legal provision in question does not apply to wild berry picking, because it is not conducted as employment," and the 2010 document added a specification that wild berry picking is "work done through the Right of Public Access." This roughly corresponds with the MOI-coordinated report on wild berry picking from 2007, which stated that the "Aliens Act provision 81 §, subsection 1, paragraph 4, that allows working without a residence permit, applies only to contractual employment." Interestingly, in 2012, the named Aliens Act section was revived in the MFA guiding document, which again stated that "regarding wild berry picking, Aliens Act provision 81 §, subsection 1, paragraph 4, applies." The following year, this was complemented by a general reference to the Schengen Visa Code, and the named legal provision remained as the justification for issuing Schengen visas for berry picking until it was removed from the guiding document for the 2015 picking season. In summary, the interpretations of the legal grounds for the entry of the non-worker, and non-entrepreneur pickers varied almost biannually; nothing indicates that this would be a consequence of alterations in other legislation and authoritative texts; and distinct authorities presented conflicting interpretations of the matter.

From 2016 on, justifications for the arrangement are linked to the Right of Public Access. The definition provided ("picking wild berries belongs to the Right of Public Access in Finland. It is regarded that realising this right might also entail separate travel from abroad") seems to characterise berry picking as a universal common right. Or, the definition supposedly admits that the usufructuary right and the Right of Public Access apply to all foreigners, regardless of how (or if) their status in Finland has been authorised. Yet, given that people arriving in Finland for industrial berry picking are required to present an invitation letter from a berry-purchasing company as part of their visa application—as well as to fulfil some of the standard requirements in the Visa Code—the companies (or the staffing agencies and local brokers they use; see Hedberg, 2021) to have a role in determining who is able to enter Finland for berry picking. In 2016, the guiding documents also established an explicit interpretation of the Visa Code, and the Regulation 562/2006 sections on sufficient means of subsistence; the guidelines state that these legal provisions make it possible "to use a Schengen Visa for seasonal work." In 2023, the MFA document stated: "The Visa Code does not specifically regulate a situation in which a third-country national arrives in a member state to pick natural products on the grounds of the Right of Public Access." In other words, the reference to the Right of Public Access—and the possibility to travel to Finland from abroad to realise one's Right of Public Access—remained in the document, while the interpretation of the Visa Code was altered. Overall, the shifting references to the Visa Code contained similar contradictions as those identified in the

aforementioned Aliens Act provision discussion, while the Right of Public Access remained a central element for legitimising the berry-picking arrangement.

Regarding the general requirements of the Visa Code, the MFA annual guiding document stated the aim of preventing unauthorised work and irregular migration, in other words, pickers arriving on short-term visas are allowed to enter because they are not expected to overstay their visas. Furthermore, the MFA document mentioned a requirement to prevent human trafficking. In 2009, the document acknowledged specificities regarding the foreign pickers' situations, stating that "currently, some of the pickers have become indebted, which exposes them to human trafficking-related phenomena." This became another recirculated sentence, which in 2014 was complemented by the requirement to "aim to ensure" that the pickers would receive a daily net income of EUR 30. The sum was also considered to cover the Visa Code requirement for sufficient funds to enter Finland (EUR 30 between 2006 and 2023). Since 2015, berry-purchasing companies, together with MFA and MEAE representatives, co-signed a Letter of Intent (indicating intention, not a binding commitment), where they voluntarily consented to the aim of ensuring pickers received a daily income of EUR 30, but from which lodging and other costs could be deducted. Until the enactment of Lex Berry in 2021, these were the only state-provided principles regarding the pickers' income level; meanwhile, the pickers were also seen as being "exposed to human trafficking-related phenomena." The legislative history of the Lex Berry continued to name the Visa Code requirement for means of subsistence as the only determining criteria for the pickers' income, which according to the government bill HE 42/2021 meant "at least 30 euros daily minimum income after earning the flight ticket and the costs for lodging during the stay" (Finnish Government, 2021). Interestingly, the sum regarded as the minimum requirement to enter the country seemed to align with the minimum compensation amount.

The shifting and circular legal definitions that I have now presented underscore a governmental determination to facilitate a consistent supply of temporary labour for the wild berry industry in Finland. These ongoing alterations also bring forth the exceptionality of the arrangement, since the practices do not seem to comply with existing legislation. A document released during the Covid-19 pandemic-related restrictions explicates an incentive for the arrangement. Under pandemic-related travel restrictions, the Government of Finland allowed pickers from Thailand to enter Finland with a separate decision in July 2020. At the time, Thailand was also categorised as one of the countries from where "travel for work and other essential purposes" was allowed. A joint MEAE and MFA document from 2020 stressed the need for the exemption to apply to berry pickers, as it stated—in an exceptionally straightforward manner—that allowing their mobility is a necessity. First, it explained that "in procuring raw materials for the berry industry, foreign pickers are rarely replaceable with domestic pickers." Further, under the sub-heading "The Impacts of the Restrictions," the document argued for the economic significance of companies purchasing and processing berries, and stated that the berry companies are among the few bigger employers of their regions that otherwise are "the most difficult areas regarding employment and unemployment." In other words, the need for a migrant labour force is connected to the needs of economically deprived areas with a high prevalence of unemployment of locals, some of whom are potentially employed by the industry in the processing stage of the production chain. This perspective of (un)employment, and the supposed necessity of permitting the entry of migrant pickers, can be also considered as an example of a situation where the deregulation of labour and subcontracting devalues the price of labour to the extent that it is hard to find local people to carry out the labour (see Wills et al., 2009, p. 4). At the same time, mere economic interest does not sufficiently formally justify this allowance for exceptional mobility. The aforementioned application of the

Visa Code in the context of the Right of Public Access formed the formal justification. This also reflects the epistemic characteristics of migration governance, where fragmentation and frantic changes are the norm (Tazzioli, 2019). I suggest the patchwork-like epistemic pattern contributes to the possibilities of amplifying differentiation in the labour market, which in this case, plays a part in contributing to the pickers' unregulated labour market status.

6. Legislating "Non-Work"

Besides the regulations surrounding their entry to Finland, another critical point that raises concerns about the status of berry pickers is their formally non-existent labour market position. While the question of an unregulated labour market position links directly to labour protection, the issue can be regarded from an even broader perspective: Besides the residency-based social security that short-term visitors are not entitled to, a wage worker status conditions societal inclusion in Finland in many ways (see Bendixsen & Näre, 2024). For instance, even with current attempts to crumble the collective bargaining model, it remains a central arena for wage workers' political participation.

In this section, I discuss the rationale for categorising berry picking as "non-work," and the unregulated labour market status of the berry pickers, which seems to differ from all other groups of workers. In comparison, when platform gig workers' status as independent contractors has been questioned as bogus self-employment (see Maury, 2023), the debate concerns the categories of employer and entrepreneur, none of which are currently seen to be formally applicable to the berry pickers' situation, according to the interpretations put forward by the employment authority and cited at the beginning of this article, for instance. The chosen point of departure for the prevailing legislation—the Act on the Legal Status of Foreigners Picking Natural Products, the Lex Berry—was to leave the unique status unaltered. Admittedly, the government bill HE 42/2021, which is the most central document in legislative history for legal interpretation, described the nature of the berry-picking activity by referring to the pickers as "entrepreneurs of a kind" on one occasion. However, a discussion about the pickers fulfilling any legislative requirements imposed on entrepreneurs in Finland is completely non-existent. Instead, the possibility of categorising the pickers as formal wage employees is frequently raised in policy documents, and throughout legislative history.

To begin with, the nature of the berry picking arrangement is, on a formal level, tied to a question of taxation, which is informed by bill HE 42/2021: "Income Tax Act 89 § guides arranging picking [of natural products] as non-contractual employment" (Finnish Government, 2021). The referred legal provision stated that income derived from certain natural products is tax-free for the picker, "unless the income should be regarded as a wage." This perhaps tautological definition was already raised in a 2007 report coordinated by the MOI, which stated: "Forest berry picking does not usually happen under contractual employment, because in that case, the income gained from picking wild berries would be regarded as taxable employment ipso jure the Income Tax Act 89 §" (MOI, 2007, p. 4). The exemption in the Income Tax Law is again often linked to the right to Right of Public Access. For instance, bill HE 42/2021 addressed tax exemption under the heading "Right of Public Access," which is regarded as the legal grounds for berry picking; furthermore, the bill acknowledged that that tax exemption concerns mainly natural products that the Right of Public Access permits people to pick (with the only specification being the regulations concerning the spring growth of spruce trees). What is not stated in discussions about the berry picking arrangement is that the tax exemption of natural products

through an amendment to the Income Tax Act was enshrined decades after the juridical recognition of the Right of Public Access, which has existed as a consuetudinary law since the 1920s. Yet, the Right of Public Access underpins discussions of taxation (even when some of the stakeholder comments about the draft HE 42/2021 bill strongly contested the application of the Right of Public Access to commercial berry picking; see Peltola et al., 2014) and consequently, shaped the definition of non-employment. The connection to the Right of Public Access also invited associations between commercial berry picking and what is usually regarded as a recreational activity or a side hustle among Finnish people, and as such, is notably different from the daily volumes generated by commercial picking for the industry. For instance, in parliamentary hearings on the Lex Berry, berry picking was also presented as an opportunity for Finnish young people to gain extra income, and previous research has also underscored that wild berry picking is, traditionally, "an activity practised mainly by children, women, and elderly people" (La Mela, 2014, p. 273). In other words, it is relatively easy to conflate a tax-exempt activity for commercial purposes with traditional forms of unvalued labour.

A question that interlinks with the taxation issue is what comprises "constituent elements of contractual employment," and whether an agreement between the involved parties should be regarded as contractual wage employment. As the format of employment contracts is not restricted in Finland, it is possible to regard certain cases as having evolved to constitute an employment relationship without this being formally explicated. In 2006, six companies that were hoping to invite pickers from Thailand requested a prospective taxation authority decision, to ensure that inviting the pickers would not be regarded as employment. The question was framed by stating that persons arriving from a faraway country would therefore not be familiar with the boreal forests and their berries, and consequently, need more guidance than pickers arriving from nearby areas. Aligning with the information provided by the berry companies, the Central Tax Board decision in 2006 stated that: "The berry pickers pick berries on their own account, and sell the berries to a buyer they choose." When questioning this interpretation that the berry companies were not responsible for adhering to employer obligations, the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions requested from the Labour Council (an independent authority under the MEAE tasked to provide expert statements on the applications of labour law) a statement on contractual employment in the industry in 2010 and 2014. The Labour Council investigated the issue by reviewing the evidence provided by the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions, and the berry companies' descriptions of pickers' "agency" which state that "the pickers can sell their berries to whomever," and concluded that, mainly for this reason, constituent elements of contractual employment are not fulfilled. An MEAE-commissioned report in 2014, however, critiqued the decisions by the Central Tax Board and the Labour Council and remarked that they were grounded on material provided to the authorities, which states the pickers have the freedom to sell berries to whomever they want, and that, in practice, this is not the case. Nevertheless, the Labour Council decisions were referred to as guiding documents in bill HE 42/2021 and defined the lay of the land for Lex Berry.

In 2021, the debated freedom to choose the buyer became a legislated right. The Lex Berry stated that "a picker has the right to sell the natural products they have picked to a party they choose" (see Finlex, 2021, § 4, subsection 1). Interestingly, a parliamentary committee report on the law proposal stated that "natural products are usually picked in the countryside, and there is not necessarily public transport connections to the campsites where the pickers are staying, and the pickers do not have an actual possibility to sell…to another buyer" (Employment and Equality Committee, 2021). Relatedly, what was not addressed in the documents was the observation made in natural products policy documents on the lack of infrastructure for

receiving picked berries. For instance, a 2018 report from the natural product sector described recent developments in berry infrastructure:

> Purchasing berries has changed in a radical manner, roughly during the last decade: before berries were received by several village shops and market squares in municipal centres, but nowadays, this type of purchasing has diminished to be almost nonexistent, and the purchasing companies organise logistics according their own picker-camps [foreign pickers house]. (Ristioja & Lapin ELY-keskus, 2018, p. 12)

Records from a parliamentary reading addressing the law proposal also highlighted this issue. The pickers' legislated freedom to sell the berries to a party of their choosing was regarded as unfair from the perspective of the berry companies. In response to this, the chairperson of the responsible parliamentary committee suggested that a pre-emptive purchasing right comes "with a great likelihood that the constituent elements of employment would be met." In other words, the reasoning for the unregulated status of the berry pickers relies on the fact that the pickers are free to sell the berries to whomever. While there are contradictory views about whether this is possible in practice, the enacted law states the freedom to choose the buyer as the berry pickers' right. The imaginary market serves as a guarantee for fulfilling the pickers' rights—without ideas of individualism and (neo)liberal freedom (Hall, 1983/2021), such reasoning would be unintelligible.

Finally, this reasoning takes for granted the contemporary geographical reconfiguration of the reserve army of labour, enabling a foreign-born labour supply (in the case at hand, from the Global South) that translates into a migrant division of labour (Wills et al., 2009). Arguing against a model of contractual employment, bill HE 42/2021 states that lost tax exemption is a potential negative consequence of contractual employment. The bill does not elaborate on this further, but a likely explanation is that the pickers are paid so little that it's assumed they are not eligible to pay taxes. The bill also remarks that "Finnish pickers usually lack an incentive to sell their berries to the industry, but sell directly to consumers" (Finnish Government, 2021). Reports from the natural product sector note a significant price difference between consumer and industry "markets," and multiple natural product policy documents repeat that "Berry companies are dependent on a foreign seasonal labour force." While the rationale for permitting unregulated work does not explicitly address that the pickers usually are very poor, their willingness to accept working conditions that "Finnish pickers usually lack the incentive for" is taken for granted. Similarly, stakeholder comments supporting the law proposal note that, "according to the understanding of the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, operating within contractual employment could in practice make the pickers' situation more difficult" (Regional State Administrative Agency for Northern Finland, 2020). Amongst other points, the statement on the law proposal elaborates that a potential consequence of contractual employment—applying the Labour Hours Restriction Act to berry pickers—might restrict the pickers' income. I argue that when the Occupational Health and Safety Administration—the authority tasked to monitor health and safety in working life in Finland—is concerned about the pickers' income in this manner, then that statement can not be extricated from racialised assumptions about foreign pickers. Systems of representation are significant tools for creating differentiation, i.e., shaping positionalities that mediate how people are incorporated in the processes of capitalist production and exchange (see Hall, 1983/2021). The way the foreign, i.e., Thai pickers are implicitly framed in policy documents could be characterised using Holmes' (2012, p. 183) words about perceptions "that certain categories of ethnic bodies belonged in certain occupational positions."

7. Conclusion

Irregular and precarious labour is not that uncommon in agrifood production. But from the strawberry fields in the US to the tomato farms in Mediterranean Europe, the case of the Nordic forest berry pickers nonetheless stands out due to certain particularities. Instead of a borders cape entailing a life-threatening journey across a desert or a sea, the mobility and temporary presence of the precarious living labour for the wild berry industry is partly enabled through governmental measures that facilitate a regular migration route. Concomitantly, the berry pickers' mobility is, of course, dependent on the temporary migrants' resources and travel investments.

In this analysis, I have considered how the legitimacy of a very low-paid, precarious migrant labour force that operates beyond the reach of Finnish labour laws is socially constructed in the context of a Nordic welfare state's policies and legislative texts. I have shown that the analysed documents resort to shifting, inconsistent, and circular justifications to make the unregulated position of the pickers compliant with existing legislation. From the Occupational Health and Safety Administration stating that the pickers are better off without labour hour legislation, to the MFA issuing visa instructions that moderately caution about "human trafficking-related phenomena," the analysed materials suggest a bureaucratic pattern of racialisation, in which the perceived poverty of a particular ethnic group serves as a justification for poor labour conditions (Holmes, 2012; Robinson, 1983/2000). At the same time, the fact that the wild berry industry in Finland is largely located in economically deprived rural areas is also used to justify the arrangement. Consequently, the Finnish wild berry arrangement exemplifies a case of statecraft of differential inclusion, in which migrant precarity is actively shaped by state policies.

Borders are indeed devices of inclusion (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) and a technology of differentiation (Rigo, 2011), not least in terms of labour. The analysis presented here underscores how the function of borders to facilitate a flexible and informal labour force can be deliberately utilised in order to enable the exploitation of that temporary labour force (which cannot afford to reproduce itself in the context in which the labour takes place). In the Global North, processes of racialisation—together with the "bureaucratic possibilities" provided by practices and epistemic habits of migration governance—enforce a migrant division of labour, in which levels of precarity are also unequally distributed.

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Data Availability

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REVIEW

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The Power of the Powerless: Constructions of Self-Employment in Czechia

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Abstract

This article examines the construction of self-employment in public policy debates, focusing on how political actors define self-employment and on the moral implications of these categorisations. Employing critical discourse analysis and the social construction of a target population, the authors examine verbatim transcripts of parliamentary debates in the Czech parliament between 2021 and 2023. These debates reveal how legislators perceive the value of self-employment as a part of the economy. The study explores the underpinnings of such public policy debates, as well as the moral consequences of categorising self-employment. We argue that by foregrounding some morally loaded argumentations and, in particular, discursive constructions, politicians (as both discursive and policy actors) make some parts of the experience of self-employment invisible and neglected by policy; as a result, this contributes to the precarity of the self-employed.

Keywords

critical discourse analysis; neoliberal entrepreneurship ideal; self-employment; social construction of target population

1. Introduction

This study explores the social construction of self-employment in public policy debates, including moral strategies utilised for these constructions. These debates are necessarily embedded in the neoliberal discourse on work which foregrounds the entrepreneurial self and hails its independence, pro-activity, and risk-taking (Musílek et al., 2020; Sennett, 2000). Such individual activity takes place in the markets which are presented as the most efficient means for the allocation of resources and organisation of the economy, in

which the role of the state is to remove as many constraints on market processes as possible (Crowley & Hodson, 2014, p. 91). Within the theory of enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996), the neoliberal ethos has been theorised in its effects on individual identities. Subsequent developments of du Gay's theory dynamically capture discourse about entrepreneurial identities (McCabe, 2008; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). We seek to continue this line of scholarship and argue for incorporating more material and institutional components of discourses into analyses (Kenny & Scriver, 2012). This goal led us to study discourses on entrepreneurship in close relation to policy measures and regulation and their material devices, such as the electronic cash register (known as EET in the Czech context and also referred to as EET later in this article). By analysing the tangible outcomes of policy debates and justifications, this article emphasises the material manifestations of discourses.

Between 2021 and 2023 Czechia, like other countries in Central Europe, had a relatively stable labour market with low unemployment rates (European Commission, 2022). However, part-time employment and lower wages are subject to a higher tax burden than above-average wages (European Commission, 2022), which may influence workers' choices to be self-employed instead. There has been a continuous slow growth in the number of self-employed people, reaching 691,700 people in 2022, around 16% of the economically active population (AMSP, 2023). The continuous and slow growth of the number of self-employed resembles trends in other countries, such as the UK (Henley, 2023). Self-employment in Czechia has many shades—it ranges from full-time entrepreneurial activity to part-time exploration of alternative career paths, and the work can be conducted for one or two clients or a wider clientele.

This article analyses verbatim transcripts of parliamentary debates in Czechia (2021 to September 2023) to unpack discursive constructions of entrepreneurship in the Czech political discourse and what effects these constructions have on public policy and regulation. In analysing these debates, we also pay attention to moralities mobilised to justify different policy measures directed at the self-employed. We argue that by foregrounding some morally loaded argumentations and, in particular, discursive constructions, politicians (as both discursive and policy actors) render parts of the self-employment experience invisible.

In this article, we are interested in how the changes in the role of entrepreneurship and self-employment described in the literature (Calás et al., 2009; Marsh & Thomas, 2017) have been reflected in the Czech policy discourse. Research questions guiding this article are as follows: What discursive constructions of entrepreneurship can be found in the Czech policy discourse? To what extent does the rising number of precarious and non-standard working conditions affect these discursive constructions? To what extent is the Czech policy discourse ready to react to changes in the labour market—primarily, the proliferation of non-standard work (e.g., the gig economy, zero-hour contracts, and declining wages)?

This article follows up on the rich discussions of enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996), discursive constructions of entrepreneurship (Kenny & Scriver, 2012), and the precarity and insecurity experienced in self-employment (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Marková Volejníčková et al., 2024). Our approach to entrepreneurship is grounded in the premise that it is differently constructed in various political and social contexts and often takes on the form of an empty signifier (Jones & Spicer, 2005).

After sketching the theoretical landscapes in which our inquiry unfolds, we proceed to a short elaboration of the Czech context and the situation of the self-employed there. This is followed by a description of the data

and decisions involved in the corpus composition. The analytical framework is then explicated, drawing on the social construction of the target population (Schneider & Ingram, 1993) and emphasising the relevance of the study of precarity and self-employment. Three identified topoi of self-employment are discussed then, featuring excerpts from the data. Our discussion section summarises the moral categories and their relation to self-employment.

2. Theoretical Framework

Precarity and insecurity have become central motives in analyses of late modernity (Beck, 1992; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018). The ongoing digital transformation, the gig economy, and automatisation destabilise work structures. As a result, employment relationships have become more precarious and flexible (Beck, 2000; Weil, 2014). More people are working on a contingent, temporary, freelance, and contract basis, comprising a considerable non-standard, irregularly employed workforce, while the proliferation of irregular schedules is strengthening the temporal fragmentation of work (Fernández-Macías, 2018).

Individual workers adopt various practices to adjust to these changes, such as cultivating a personal brand (Vallas & Cummins, 2015), engaging in "everwork"—a combination of overwork, unpredictability, and constant availability (Wynn et al., 2018) while expressing passion for the work (Gershon, 2017), coping with the role disjointedness (Damarin, 2006), and building networks (Musílek et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2012). All these practices are manifestations of what the theory of enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996) and its subsequent developments (McCabe, 2008; Vallas & Cummins, 2015) analyse as regulation of identities in the neoliberal economy. Workers' reactions to the pressures of insecure job markets often require identity shifts or at least superficial acceptance of the norms of the enterprise culture (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Some bricolages of practices have even prompted researchers to create new concepts to capture the experiences, such as "portfolio workers" (Neely, 2020), who perform different work roles for various clients at the same time, or "entreployees" (Pongratz & Voß, 2003), who are employees with a higher level of self-control and self-commercialisation.

Discursive constructions of entrepreneurship are the subject of numerous studies. As Kenny and Scriver (2012, pp. 616–617) conclude in their extensive literature review, the entrepreneur can be discursively conceptualised as a quasi-religious figure (Sørensen, 2008), an agent of change (Calás et al., 2009), a saviour of a threatened economy (Kenny & Scriver, 2012), a "passive agent of omnipotent capital" (Taymans, 1951, p. 88), or a modern prince challenging hegemonic practices (Levy & Scully, 2007). These constructions can vary in different economic, political, and social contexts. For example, using a Polish case, Marsh and Thomas (2017) describe entrepreneurial discourse as a cornerstone of the Polish transition from communism to the neoliberal free market. Different discursive constructions imply distinct social positions. For instance, in the Polish case, entrepreneurship is articulated as an elite project, while Kenny and Scriver (2012) show that the Irish government stressed that "anyone can be an entrepreneur."

The results of discursive analyses often contrast with the results of studies dealing with the lived reality of entrepreneurs and self-employed people, which emphasise the precariousness and uncertainty of their living conditions. For example, neoliberal austerity policies and project work have led to the increasing number of precarious employments in civil society organisations (CSOs; Mikołajczak, 2021). As a result, insecurity and precarity—with differences in severity and urgency—are experienced by young workers with low cultural

and economic capital (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019), along with workers with high cultural capital, such as academics (Burlyuk & Rahbari, 2023; Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021) and the ICT industry and game development sub-sector (Keogh & Abraham, 2022; Ruffino, 2021). Keogh and Abraham (2022) assert that the composition of workers in game development (with one-third self-employed, one-third employed, and one-third working for free) actively reflects their precarious status and self-exploitation. Precarity is often complemented by the sense of autonomy which the dependent self-employed workers exercise in many instances—undertaking self-directed learning, choosing projects, and negotiating pay (Frisk, 2020). Similar arguments can be found in the biographical research into precarity at work and the topic of dependent self-employment (Carreri, 2022; Mrozowicki & Trappmann, 2021).

3. Methods

3.1. Context of the Study

Data show that self-employment in Czechia represents around 16% of the economically active population (AMSP, 2023). This number indicates the prevalence of self-employment, even though granular data about the exact structure and number of self-employed in Czechia are hard to obtain, as described by Dvouletý (2019, p. 3). In the period between 2005 and 2017, roughly 15% (ranging from 13.9% in 2005 to the maximum of 16.3% in 2012) of Czech's economically active population were engaged in self-employment, slightly above 13%, the average of the European Union for the same period (Dvouletý, 2019, p. 7).

The recent research on self-employment in Czechia studies the precarity of the low-income self-employed and microentrepreneurs (Marková Volejníčková et al., 2024) or evaluates social policies targeted at shifting people from unemployment to self-employment (Dvouletý, 2023).

Similar to the Polish context (see Marsh & Thomas, 2017), entrepreneurial activities and identities are also strongly articulated in the Czech political discourse. In the last decade, the Czech political discourse has been marked by the hegemony of entrepreneurial populism (Naxera & Stulík, 2021). This period started with Andrej Babiš's political success in the 2013 election. Babiš is a Czech politician and businessman, known for being the leader of the ANO 2011 party and serving as prime minister between 2018 and 2021. Entrepreneurial populism can be described as "political formations competing for public office that are led by charismatic business leaders, who claim that their ability to run businesses successfully means they will also be able to run government well" (Saxonberg & Heinisch, 2022, p. 209). This also echoes the "centrality of the entrepreneur, enterprise and competition to everyday life" (Littler, 2017, p. 193). Entrepreneurial populism represents an important context for our case since it puts discursive constructions of entrepreneurship at the centre of political debates and argumentations. Although this context is useful in understanding the political situation in Czechia, however, it is not the central focus of our arguments. We rather offer a more abstract insight into the ongoing debates around precarity and neoliberal work.

3.2. Data

The corpus has been constructed using a full-text search in verbatim transcripts from both chambers of Czech parliament in the current election period (for Senate 2020–2022 and Chamber of Deputies 2021–2023), using the keywords OSVČ (a shorthand legal and tax term for self-employed), *švarcsystém**

(colloquial for "dependent self-employment"), and *živnostn** (a common expression for self-employed). The broad keyword selection was chosen for the exploration of contexts in which the self-employed are mentioned. The subsequent manual selection of excerpts for in-depth analysis was conducted by the authors together. An excerpt was selected if the topic or policy measure debated in the excerpt has a material effect on the self-employed's lives and practices and their place in the social and economic system. During the selection process, we also wrote notes on the context of the debate (e.g., reaction to whom; what the previous session was about; the associated legislative proposals in the proceedings; and vote results—if it came to a vote). We included notes about the position of the speaker (i.e., leadership position in a party). The number of searched entries and those selected as relevant for the analysis are summarized in Table 1. Genres of entries varied from interpellations and disputes about a proposal (sometimes including interactions between ministers, prime ministers, or deputies) to filibuster speeches.

The selected excerpts were gathered in a spreadsheet format which also detailed records about the date, session number, and excerpt identification number. Apart from identification data, the file with corpus data included written notes on context, association with policy documents, and, if possible, the policy outcomes (e.g., voting results and final document number).

3.3. Analytical Approach

The analytical framework employed in this article is the social construction of target populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). This framework enables the dissection of how the self-employed and dependent self-employed are constructed by members of the Czech parliament. This analytical approach classifies the self-employed as a target population of policy concerning two categories—power and morality. These categories stem from our main theoretical interest. The first axis answers the question of whether entrepreneurs are constructed as powerful actors or as a precarious social group. Measures of political power include the size of the group's degree of mobilization, access to governing institutions, material resources, and propensity to vote. The second axis then classifies these constructions according to the morality they are associated with. Positive moral characteristics include for example contributions to the economy, loyalty, generosity, discipline, respectfulness, intelligence, or creativity. This analytical framework then enables us to relate the multiplicity of identified discursive constructs to key research questions and theoretical dilemmas.

Advantaged groups are perceived as powerful and positively constructed in moral terms. On the other hand, the contenders are also powerful but negatively constructed because they have a reputation for gaining their power unfairly or abusing it. Dependents are regarded as politically weak but with a positive moral construction and, as a result, they deserve to be protected by public policies. Deviants (e.g., criminals) are constructed as politically weak with negative moral connotations since they are supposed to be punished and controlled (Ingram & Schneider, 2015; Schneider & Ingram, 2008).

Table 1. Number of search entries found and selected for analysis.

Parliament of the Czech Republic	Search entries found	Entries selected for in-depth analysis
Senate (2020–2022)	16	5
Chamber of Deputies (2021–2023)	389	194
Total number of entries	405	201

Employing critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), the authors examined verbatim transcripts of parliamentary debates. To reveal mechanisms behind the social construction of target populations, we combined Schneider and Ingram's (2008) approach with Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, pp. 63–94). That is, the task of the analyst is to identify the topoi—parts of argumentation that belong to the obligatory (either explicit or inferable) premises. The topoi are the content-related warrants or conclusion rules that connect arguments with the overarching claim of the discourse studied.

The analytical process consisted of two phases. First, open coding of the material fostered familiarisation with the material and uncovered topics present in the corpus. Second, the data were approached with a question ("How are the self-employed constructed in the excerpts?") to describe the characteristics and/or behaviours of the self-employed implied and described in the excerpt. The last step involved coding these descriptions with four major categories of the analytical framework as described above: advantaged, dependents, and deviants. The following presentation of the results is organised along these categories.

4. Findings

The self-employed as a target population of public policies was constructed on the axis of power (weak to strong) and the moral charge (positive to negative). Policy issues and events that were mostly debated by MPs included the skyrocketing energy prices (mostly 2022) and the question of whom and how the state should help in this situation and why the self-employed should also be eligible for some social security schemes. A recurring theme was the EET and its abolishment.

The findings are presented in three sub-sections, shedding light on the social constructions of the self-employed as advantaged (4.1), dependent (4.2), and deviants (4.3). Contenders were not present in the analysed material. Quotes from the empirical material are accompanied by information about the opposition/coalition positioning, the party (far-right populist SPD; populist ANO; right-wing ODS; Pirate) the parliamentary session number, the date of the quote, and excerpt ID. For detailed information about the party orientation see Havlík and Lysek (2022, p. 233). Each section ends with a paragraph outlining the conclusion rules present regarding social constructions (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

4.1. Self-Employed as Advantaged

On some occasions, the self-employed are constructed in a positive way and with strong power; thus, they deserve the attention of policymakers, along with advantageous policies. At the heart of this topos in our empirical material is the idea of the self-employed as business entrepreneurs. This construction foregrounds the characteristics or imaginaries of *small entrepreneurship*, *hard work*, *tight budgets*, and *honesty*—values that are similar to the modest aspirations of the young self-employed in northeast England (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019, p. 4). This social construction evokes traditional tradesmen and service providers, epitomised by actors referring to restaurant owners and hair salons. The entrepreneur, in the Czech political discourse as present in our data, is an ordinary citizen doing daily business independently, not relying on the state and creating economic value—which the state cannot create, as per the former Minister of Economic Affairs (11 July 2023, session 71, excerpt 71–31, from our research data). Similar to the Irish case (Kenny & Scriver, 2012), these tradesmen are considered to be the "backbone of the economy" because their

economic activity creates value, and part of this value is transferred to the state in the form of taxes. The tradesmen may even employ other people and thus multiply their value creation.

The construction of the self-employed as advantaged echoes the Weberian construction of entrepreneurship. This construction describes responsible rational entrepreneurship, in contrast to adventurous capitalism (see Weber, 2002). Like Weber, Czech politicians argue that the entrepreneurs' work ethic, characterised by hard work, discipline, and frugality, has contributed to the growth of capitalism. Thus, there is no need for risk-taking capitalism, where entrepreneurs are willing to take significant risks in pursuit of innovative ideas or unconventional business ventures. Instead of passion and drive, members of parliament emphasise daily and cyclical hard work. In contrast to neoliberal values of risk-taking, innovation, and openness to change, parliamentary discussions stress stability, activity, and independence:

> Perhaps we should appreciate the success: We should appreciate everyone who does not extend his hand to the state, who is active, who works to support himself. Let's appreciate that and make it easier for them so that there are as many people like that as possible, so that more people are interested in working independently, rather than us undermining their efforts and then boasting that we are paying out more and more on various benefits and so on. (14 July 2023, session 71, Opposition MP, SPD, excerpt 71–222)

This quote also illustrates that with their independence, the self-employed may even be seen as more positive actors than the state apparatus. This rhetoric was developed further in the discussion about the role of entrepreneurs and the role of the state in reconstruction after the Covid-19 pandemic. As an opposition MP and the former Minister of Economic Affairs noted:

> But no state or government will do an economic reboot; only the private sector will always do it: that is, companies, entrepreneurs, tradesmen and their high-performing employees. (11 July 2023, session 71, ANO, excerpt 71–31)

In this quote above, independence is closely associated with performance, whereas in other instances, it is referred to as hard work. The individual entrepreneurial activities are productive, while the state apparatus only sustains the environment in which these acts can freely happen. This productivity does not rest on making capital work; it is also fuelled by individual sacrifice. Politicians hailing and paying verbal respect to the sacrifices of the self-employed have already been called out as hypocritical (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019, p. 13). This verbal acknowledgement is contradicted by the policy decisions by which self-employed people in Czechia are not entitled to or have limited access to several social security measures that employees can enjoy (e.g., financial support due to caring responsibilities). What politicians construct as a sacrifice serves as proof of the skills and capabilities of the self-employed in adapting to the insecure environment created not only by market forces but also by policy measures. Politicians emphasise the sacrifices while glossing over the impact of policy on the precarious conditions of the self-employed. This foregrounding of the moral value of suffering contributes positively to the social construction of the self-employed as worthy, good citizens:

> Compared with employees, for example, self-employed are not entitled to sick leave, maternity leave; they do not get food stamps; they cannot get sick pay for a family member; they are not entitled to paid holidays and so on. They therefore bear considerably more risk than employees. For example,

> when tradespeople want to take holidays, it is only unpaid, and the holiday is at the expense of their salary. Self-employed therefore do not benefit from, or are not entitled to benefit from, the benefits that are due to employees, and despite all this, the government is throwing sticks under their feet and digging trenches between them and employees. (17 June 2023, session 65, Opposition MP, SPD, excerpt 65–57)

Using the comparison with employees enables the above speaker to point out their major difference from the self-employed who live independently and accept risk. Therefore, the topos of the self-employed as privileged can be summarised in the following statements:

1. Entrepreneurs work for the good of society.
2. When they are well off, the whole community thrives.
3. They are defined by daily honest work, independence, and activity, not by a desire for risk-taking and collecting high rewards.

Implicitly, it is acknowledged that the goal of their entrepreneurship is to provide means for their families, not to create excessive profit. In their small ways, these "little Czechs" (Holy, 1996) contribute to the prosperity of their society by making services available to citizens and saving the state and large employers a burden by being independent and self-sufficient actors.

4.2. Self-Employed as Dependents

The power of the hard-working self-employed, whose individual activity creates the backbone of Czech society, is nevertheless not unassailable. For example, small businesses were affected by restrictions and lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most businesses faced temporary closures, supply chain disruptions, and reduced consumer demand due to lockdowns and social distancing measures. However, a positive social construction of the self-employed is sustained even when they need some help from the state:

> It is indisputable that after two years of harsh measures that are restricting and destroying their businesses, our tradesmen and small Czech companies clearly deserve significant and, above all, really effective help from the state. Help which will prevent the disappearance of [the] self-employed and which will also support honestly working small entrepreneurs in the future and enable them to restart their businesses. (17 February 2022, session 10, Opposition MP SPD, excerpt 10–11)

The self-employed in this social construction suffer more than expected in the market economy (in the topos of "advantaged"), due to unpredictable external factors and state measures. Even under harsh conditions they survived, but the above speaker estimates that recovery to full economic output needs state intervention. This quote assumes that there is some acceptable level of sacrifice and insecurity in self-employment and when this is exceeded, the state should offer effective help. Being able to sustain oneself (and one's family) independently in the past builds up the moral credit for help in the future. In the quote above, the state was considerably responsible for policies harmful to the self-employed and is called to make up for its mistakes. On other occasions, this picture is painted in a different light and extends to market forces and the macroeconomic situation:

> In many ways they [the self-employed] are surviving; in many ways, they are barely standing to make a living running that business, that trade, especially somewhere in the countryside. Moreover, let us remember that they have it much more complicated today. We all know that demand is falling, demand is falling due to the fact that prices are rising….At the same time, their costs are rising. Perhaps we will see that too. Let us look at how much was paid for energy. (19 May 2023, session 66, Opposition MP, former Minister of Economic Affairs, ANO, excerpt 66–3)

With the skyrocketing energy prices, politicians have grown more concerned with the insecurity of self-employment. Apart from the external factors, some other instances also brought to attention the fragility of self-employment. These were often situations when "little Czech" entrepreneurs faced regulations alone:

> Administrators collect these [copyright] fees in these hardware stores, hairdressers and other establishments, where the legal conditions for this are not met, and they simply rely on the low level of defence or legal literacy of entrepreneurs [and] tradesmen who, of course, in the face of a huge organisation collecting [copyright] fees with many, many lawyers, are not prepared to face such an unequal fight. (27 September 2023, session 35, Opposition MP, Pirate, excerpt 35–177)

The state, according to this quote, colonises the entrepreneurial sphere and creates barriers that inhibit the activity of the self-employed (among other economic players). The regulation of the purchase of used vehicles for entrepreneurs or the necessity to pay fees to copyright unions in public establishments are mentioned as other inconveniences. Implicitly, the MPs speak about the self-employed in Czechia as people who do not stand up to the entrepreneurship ideal (Down & Warren, 2008). That is, they lack financial resources (buying secondhand cars from Germany that do not fulfil ecological norms to save money) and knowledge (they might fail to choose the most rational option for taxing their income), and they cannot defend themselves from the pressures of state bureaucracy or the copyright collecting agency. These examples justify further intervention in the entrepreneurial sphere while staying true to the entrepreneurial ideal.

Parliamentary speakers pointed out that in critical periods, the independence and stability of the entrepreneur population might be weaker, so the state should consider their vulnerability when preparing new policies. These, however, should be restricted only to the most effective and urgent matters, as excessive state interventions also make the self-employed vulnerable and less active:

> Entrepreneurs and tradesmen need to be supported [and] relieved of the absolutely senseless obligations you have imposed on them under your government. (23 June 2022, session 27, Coalition MP, ODS, excerpt 27–41)

This red tape rhetoric criticises bureaucratic regulations and administrative procedures as a burden that distracts the self-employed from the core of their economic activity. In the Czech context, such burdensome procedures are emblematised by the EET. EET represents an emblematic issue of policy conflict between the government and opposition in entrepreneurial policy.

This system, in which EETs were connected to an online tax authority, was initiated in 2016 by the government, led by the social democratic party ČSSD with support from the populist ANO. In the first phase,

the EET was obligatory to record sales for accommodation and catering services. In the second step, the obligation to also record sales for retail and wholesale trade was added. Initially, registration was intended as compulsory for other sectors, except for certain crafts. However, these third and fourth waves were postponed. The system was heavily criticised by right-wing opposition, which proposed its complete abolition. After the election, right-wing parties formed the government and pushed for the abolition of the EET by the end of 2022. Discussions surrounding this legislative decision brought to the foreground the topoi of self-employment as dependent on the Czech state.

The EET system embodies the barriers that the government erects for the idealised development of the business environment which enables the advantaged self-employed to thrive, as described in the previous section of this article. From the perspective of the system's critics, these barriers have established a culture of mistrust that has contaminated the relationship between entrepreneurs and the state:

> And the obligations that come with that—posting signs, as I said here, checks on nonsensical obligations, undercover controls, fines for absurdities, and those fines—I'm not going to repeat them here. All these things that came with the EET system itself created a hostile environment towards tradesmen and entrepreneurs. It was really an attitude of pre-emptive mistrust towards economically active people. (23 June 2022, session 27, Coalition MP, ODS, excerpt 27–43)

The topos of the dependent self-employed can be summarised in the following statements:

1. Moments of crisis represent deviations from the normal situation.
2. In these moments, self-employed people cannot operate independently, and they depend on the state to protect their interests or even provide financial support. The self-employed are defined as weak agents who are positive for society as a whole and thus deserve to be supported with no ramifications for their moral standing. Besides the temporality of this position, there is an important aspect to how this construction is related to other actors in the same field, particularly the state administration.
3. The state bureaucracy is a strong actor which colonises the entrepreneurial sphere. The bureaucratic system is discussed as being unresponsive to the needs and values of individuals and represents a barrier to the development of the entrepreneurial sphere.

4.3. Self-Employed as Deviants

Up to this point, this article has discussed social constructions of the self-employed in Czechia which positively feature this group. However, the dark sides of self-employment are depicted in the topos of deviants. Deviants are differentiated also by their weak political position which makes them an ideal target for regulations and scapegoating and to utilise their ostracisation for the legitimation of various policies. The construction of the self-employed as deviants is underpinned by the assumption that the deviant self-employed pose a threat to the independent, rule-abiding self-employed.

In this context, parliamentary speakers recalled the period in the 1990s which was a phase of economic transformation and adaptation of Czechia to the capitalist system. In the collective memory, this period symbolises the unpredictability of the economic environment, the growth of the informal economy, and the lack of protection for entrepreneurs:

> Today, even experts from professional organisations, entrepreneurs and trade unionists consider the current government's plan to be a senseless return to the so-called 1990s. They point out that some businesses have once again shifted part of their income to the grey economy. (11 October 2022, session 41, Opposition MP, ANO, excerpt 41–42)

The construction of the self-employed as deviants appeared in the EET debate when it was used by the advocates of EETs. They argued that the EET cash register system clears the economy of dishonest and tax-avoiding self-employed and entrepreneurs. According to this view, the danger for honest entrepreneurs does not lurk in state expansion and colonisation but rather in the lack of control over other entrepreneurs whose behaviour deviates from the norms. Deviation from the norms (e.g., tax evasion or dependent self-employment) may create a surplus of capital resources which gives the deviants an advantage over the ideal, the honest self-employed. Growing deviance in the economic sphere makes it hard for the state to know what is happening in the economy and forces it to rely on inaccurate data as material for decision-making:

> Strangely, however, many catering businesses today have payment terminals that have broken down. Why? But you certainly haven't noticed that, have you? For the restaurant or craft shop owner, this mapped outflow of funds can provide additional, secondary indicators that can help guide the future direction or expansion of the business. We actually educated them; we helped them [with EET]. But this data [is] also important for government decision-making, and you know that. But you probably do not need the data or the money, my dear government. (25 November 2022, session 46, Opposition MP, ANO, excerpt 46–16)

The construction of the self-employed as deviants allowed the opposition to legitimize EET enforcement as a mechanism of control over the entrepreneurial sector. Metaphorically, its purpose was to separate the wheat from the chaff. The scope of control has been debated as illustrated by the following quote:

> All of these [obligations] that came with the EET system itself created a hostile environment towards tradesmen and entrepreneurs….[T]he dissent opinions [of the constitutional judges] also contained a very important sentence for me: that the introduction of EET was something like keeping an entire classroom after school just because one pupil was disturbing the class. But it is exactly the opposite, ladies and gentlemen. We do not need to erect barriers to business and control everyone permanently online. (23 June 2022, session 27, Coalition MP, ODS, excerpt 27–43)

The lack of clarity about how many dishonest self-employed there are opens up the floor for discussion about the extent of deviant entrepreneurship. Lack of data and research create space for anecdotal evidence (e.g., card payment terminals that have broken down).

Deviant construction of self-employment derives from the following conclusion rules:

1. If there are some dishonest entrepreneurs, we need to protect honest entrepreneurs from dishonest ones.
2. Measures against deviants must not endanger the population of those who are to be protected from deviants.

5. Discussion

Recent discussions of precarity as part of self-employment present a somewhat ambiguous phenomenon. On the one hand, the literature on the neoliberal entrepreneurial self (Neely, 2020; Wynn et al., 2018) shows that the self-employed internalise the neoliberal discourse and defend it at all costs (Gershon, 2017; Musílek et al., 2020). On the other hand, there is a growing body of literature documenting that self-employment does not lead to material prosperity (Henley, 2023), and thus, it is somewhat misleading to understand all experiences of self-employment as being subjugated to the neoliberal logic of competition, self-reliance, and individualism. Some self-employed people just do not have another option to make their living. In sum, the issue is whether the self-employed are the backbone of late capitalism or are a precarious class.

This article attempts to bridge these two positions by pointing out that the discursive elements of enterprise culture play a vital role in shaping and justifying the policies that have concrete and material impacts on the self-employed. Also, MacDonald and Giazitzoglu (2019) point to politicians and their attempts to shape the labour market—often promoting and pushing people into self-employment. Nevertheless, when looking at the details of the Czech parliamentary debate, it is clear that the self-employed are not fully complicit in and embodying these neoliberal ideals. Indeed, they may lack assertiveness, risk-taking and capital resources. These findings complement the literature on self-employment that still mainly relies on the ideal of the heroic entrepreneurial individual and that masks a whole spectrum of other experiences and material realities.

Across the topoi of self-employment in Czechia (see Table 2) there are two cross-cutting moral themes. The first is concerned with legitimacy and resulting deservingness, and the second stretches between trust and control. Standing up to the ideal of the hard-working, frugal, and independent self-employed who co-create the backbone of Czech society provides legitimacy to the provision of benefit schemes when crises hit the country. Former contributions to the state budget in the form of taxes or to the pension schemes are expressions of commitment that may elicit state action addressing the specific needs of the self-employed: for example, when they are omitted from the initial responses to the spiking electricity prices. This moral dimension is apparent in the frequent usage of the rhetoric sequence "citizens, families, self-employed" by several MPs regardless of the policy issue.

In crises, however, the self-employed cannot count on a safety net provided by the state. Yet they need to trust that the state will reciprocate their contribution to the country's economic development. Thus, the second moral issue stretches between control and trust. Various MPs acknowledge that the self-employed are fully capable of conducting their businesses (following the moral ideal mentioned above) and that the state should trust them to know what is in their best interest. However, trust from the state is necessarily cautious because of the danger of the tax-avoiding self-employed moving part of their prosperous economic activity to the informal economy. The deliberation between parties is not about whether the self-employed should be controlled. It is limited to debating the degree and specific practices of control. The state oversight is positioned as protecting consumers (fellow citizens) and the self-employed from deviant entrepreneurship. When the trust is broken and all the self-employed are taken for deviants, the economic system is overburdened with inefficiency and a crisis of legitimacy undermines the solidarity between those with different employment statuses. When the trust is mutual and the majority of the self-employed play their part according to the moral ideal, they deserve the right not to be controlled excessively.

Table 2. Topoi of the social construction of the self-employed in Czech parliamentary debates (2020–2023).

		Constructions	
		Positive	Negative
Power	Strong	**Advantaged** Referred to as the backbone of the economy, independent creators of employment opportunities, and taxpayers who are no burden to the state. Conclusion rules: Entrepreneurs work for the good of society; When they are well off, the whole community thrives; They are defined by daily honest work, independence, and activity, not by a desire for risk-taking and collecting high rewards.	**Contenders** Not present in the analysed material.
	Weak	**Dependents** Referred to as on a tight budget, often lacking information when facing legal claims and as recipients in compensation schemes. Conclusion rules: Moments of crisis represent deviations from the normal situation; Self-employed depend on the state to protect their interests or even provide financial support; The state bureaucracy is a strong actor which colonises the entrepreneurial sphere when needed.	**Deviants** Referred to as tax-avoiding, shifting to cash-only payments, and not having solidarity with society. Conclusion rules: If there are some dishonest entrepreneurs, we need to protect honest entrepreneurs from dishonest ones; Measures against deviants must not destroy the population of those who are to be protected from deviants.

Both these moral disputes consider the self-employed to be a coherent group and overlook the differences that may affect the self-employed's choices and practices (e.g., moving part of their income to the grey economy may be an expression of a lack of resources and scarcity of consumer demand in times of high inflation rather than an expression of a lack of solidarity). The discursive battle about the extent of control and bureaucracy obfuscated the differences in the socio-economic conditions of the self-employed and ultimately their precarity.

6. Conclusion

In our article, we have examined how politicians, operating in their dual capacities as discursive and policy actors, construct moral expectations of the self-employed, which are used for the justification of policy measures. Thus, we have analysed which aspects of entrepreneurial culture (du Gay, 1996) permeated the public policy discourses. The hegemony of entrepreneurial culture, together with the neoliberal notion of freedom and independence (Crowley & Hodson, 2014), is apparent in the delegitimisation of some regulatory measures (in our case the EET system).

Our study of the Czech parliamentary debates contributes to the theory of enterprise culture with the description of discursive strategies involved in making the precarious self-employed invisible. Also, it points to the cultural anchoring of enterprise culture. The Czech case, for example, differs from the hegemony of the risk-taking ideal of an entrepreneurial culture with the emphasis on the rhetorical figure of the traditional, hard-working, and frugal entrepreneur. This figure is reinforced by recurrent reference to the post-communist transition to capitalism in Central Europe to which the current situation in the entrepreneurial sphere is compared.

Our analysis shows that the discourse of self-employment tends to obscure the socio-economic conditions of dependents, masking the presence of precarity within the self-employment sector, and the vulnerability is acknowledged only in reference to major crises. The moral issues of deservingness and control conceal socio-economic aspects of the self-employment experience and, foremost, its precarity. This obfuscation raises critical questions about the friction between the morally laden depictions of self-employed lives and their precarity. Issues related to this friction have been addressed by research on the gig economy (Caza et al., 2022; Gandini, 2019; Purcell & Brook, 2020)—an increasingly prevalent working experience in Europe, although peculiarly absent from the Czech data analysed in this article. Disjointedness between discourses and material reality presents an urgent need for further research aimed at a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted self-employment reality.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Verbatim transcripts from both chambers of the Czech parliament in the original language can be found on the respective institutions' websites.

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"The Brains Are Frozen": Precarious Subjectivities in the Humanitarian Aid Sector in Jordan

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Abstract

Under the influence of neoliberal policies and marketisation dynamics, the humanitarian sector's labour conditions become increasingly insecure. Based on one year of fieldwork in Amman, Jordan, and interviews with 39 aid professionals, this article explores the experiences of these insecure and precarious labour conditions of national and international aid workers in Jordan. Precarity in the humanitarian field is often discussed concerning aid recipients, such as refugees. It is, however, understudied in connection to aid professionals and those providing aid and care, and there is a wider lack of research on university-educated professionals' experiences of precarity. In line with feminist and decolonial scholars, I understand labour as closely interconnected with other spheres of life and look at precarity through an emotional lens. I explore aid professionals' emotions around their work conditions to come to a deeper understanding of precarious work and the difficulties of living in precarity. By taking emotions seriously, I show that they are an important yet understudied site of analysis to unravel what generates precarity for aid workers and precarity's effects on aid workers' lives and work. I argue that the structural conditions of their work produce precarious subjectivities, which are expressed in feelings such as frozenness, fatigue, and unsafety.

Keywords

aid professionals; emotions; humanitarian aid; Jordan; labour conditions; precarity; subjectivity

1. Introduction

As I rush into the café where we agreed to meet, I see Nadia sitting behind her laptop. Amman is experiencing a heatwave and I am sweating from my walk. When she notices me, Nadia gets up to give me a hug, while

I apologise for being sweaty and running a little late. She smiles, brushes aside my apology, and tells me it was beneficial because it allowed her to catch up on work. In a mix of broken Arabic and English, we start talking about the weather that even for Jordan is extreme. After a few minutes, she receives a message from her boss and lets out a deep sigh. She shakes her head after replying to the message, and I ask about her job at the national NGO she works for. She explains how stressful things are and how there is a constant worry about money. She sighs again and says: "Just money. When you sleep—money. When you get up—money. When you work—money. When you walk—money. It's very noisy, it's too much." Then she laughs and states: "*āshʿur ān āl-ʿaqūl tajamadat*. I feel like the brains are frozen." Nadia grins as she tells me this, but the comment is telling for Jordan's aid sector.

In this article, I explore the affective state Nadia expresses and the ways humanitarian aid professionals in Jordan experience precarity. Precarity is mostly studied in relation to marginalised communities: In the fields of aid and social work, scholars predominantly focus on how recipients or service-users such as refugees experience precarity (see, e.g., Ilcan et al., 2018; Smit & Rugunanan, 2014). Less well-examined are university-educated professionals' experiences of precarity, such as social workers or aid professionals (Pascucci, 2019; Pentaraki & Dionysopoulou, 2019). Although recent important works (Farah, 2020; Fassin, 2010; Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019, 2023; Ward, 2021) have begun to research labour and precarity in humanitarian aid, these issues remain underexplored. Based on one year of fieldwork in Amman, this article seeks to address this gap, shedding light on the lived experiences of those who perform the labour of caring for vulnerable communities in Jordan.

Precarity is felt by both international and national aid professionals, and there is a shared sense of precarity. However, this precarity is formed and influenced by colonial structures of inequality and neoliberalism that shape the humanitarian sector in Jordan, which results in "differentiated precarities" for national and international aid workers (Campbell & Tobin, 2016; Farah, 2020; Pascucci, 2019). In this article, I look at precarity through the lens of emotions and ask what aid professionals' emotions reveal about precarity in aid work. By looking at the emotions and feelings that aid workers express about precarity, I come to a better understanding of the effects and embodied experiences of precarious work conditions and argue that the way the humanitarian sector is structured produces precarious subjectivities. Looking at emotions will show that aid professionals grapple with a catch-22 situation, navigating challenging dilemmas arising from structural constraints and labour conditions in the aid sector. This research emphasises the need to engage with emotions when researching precarity and labour, and thereby highlights aspects and dynamics of precarity that usually remain more hidden.

In the following sections, I review existing literature on precarity and humanitarian aid, as well as subjectivity and emotions. After this, I discuss the background and methods used in this research. Next, I explore the ways aid professionals experience precarity in their work, how this affects them, and what their feelings and emotions around it are. In the discussion, I reflect upon these experiences and discuss implications. Finally, I offer some concluding remarks.

2. Labour and Precarity in Humanitarian Aid

Precarity is not a new phenomenon, especially in the Global South, and it is the norm rather than the exception (Millar, 2014; Munck, 2013; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Until recently, labour and precarity in humanitarian aid

had been undertheorized (Pascucci, 2019, p. 747), but in her critical work, Pascucci (2019, 2023) introduces labour and precarity into humanitarian aid studies. Building on postcolonial and feminist studies on social reproduction and care, she discusses how precarity is unevenly distributed in the humanitarian sector because of "spatialized hierarchies" and the division between national and international aid workers.

A small number of other studies look at aid work in relation to labour and/or precarity. Sliwinski (2012) and Ward (2020, 2021) explore humanitarian labour in relation to knowledge and hope. Ong and Combinido (2018) look at Filipino digital aid workers' precarious work and critique how these insecure labour arrangements intersect with existing power inequalities, while simultaneously discussing aid workers' aspirations and understandings of meaningful work. Farah (2020) also explores humanitarian labour in relation to power inequalities and shows how national aid professionals, compared to international professionals, have less access to geographic mobility and therefore less access to social and professional mobility, perpetuating a global division of labour. In a related field of care work, Pentaraki and Dionysopoulou (2019) in Greece and Muñoz-Arce and Duboy-Luengo (2023) in Chile explore precarity amongst social workers and its consequences in their personal and professional lives.

The concept of precarity helps to understand lived experiences and "embodied struggles" of those performing labour. With Pascucci (2019, p. 744), I define precarity as "a socially and politically distributed condition associated with material and affective labour performed in conditions of (relative) uncertainty and subalternity, a condition that is deeply ingrained in the sociality and identity of the working subjects." Although this article focuses on labour-related aspects of precarity rather than on precariousness as a universal ontological condition, following scholars such as Khosravi (2017), Reininger et al. (2022), and Muñoz-Arce and Duboy-Luengo (2023), I understand the sphere of labour as closely interconnected with and influencing all spheres of life. This includes matters traditionally seen as private and personal such as emotion and affect (Khosravi, 2017; Millar, 2014, 2017; Pascucci, 2019, 2023). Additionally, Molé (2012, p. 5) argues that the way labour is configured "creates and shapes particular kinds of…subjectivities, somatic effects, and affective registers." Pascucci (2019) calls for more studies on such subjectivities, specifically in humanitarian aid in the Global South. Building upon these works, in this article, I focus on the precarious subjectivities produced among aid professionals in Jordan. Next, I briefly discuss subjectivity and emotions before moving on to the study's background and methodology.

3. Subjectivity and Emotions

The concept of subjectivity helps to understand what precarity does. Subjectivity sheds light on how power structures are internalised and how these structures shape one's interior life (Das & Kleinman, 2000; Fiorito, 2019). With Ortner (2005, p. 31), it refers to "the inner states of acting subject" while embedded in the social world. The concept helps to understand how individual's inner lives, emotional states, and "ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects" (Ortner, 2005, p. 31) are contingent and constructed by political, economic, social, and cultural structures. Subjectivities are therefore always situational and embodied as "the body is the place where social structures settle" (Fiorito, 2019, p. 347). Subjectivities are thus shaped by power structures but simultaneously form the basis for agency and resistance (Ortner, 2005). Similarly, precarity constrains individuals but is also "the engine of resistance" that allows for new forms of resistance to arise (Butler, 2009; Khosravi, 2017; Muñoz-Arce & Duboy-Luengo, 2023, p. 635; Reininger et al., 2022). Reininger et al.

(2022) explain how precarity, precariousness, and resistance are interconnected and argue that these should be understood as a continuum. I complicate and add nuance to this argument by discussing aid workers' emotions around precarious work conditions.

Emotions provide a fruitful lens to examine precarity in the aid sector. Opposing cartesian dualistic thought, scholars such as Lutz (1988), Ahmed (2004, 2014/2004), and Hochschild (2009) understand emotions not as individual or precultural, but as cultural and social (Wright, 2012). Thus, like subjectivity, emotions have social and political dimensions. Ahmed (2004, 2014/2004) illuminates the interconnected nature of emotions and prevailing power structures. She uses the concept "affective economies" to explain that emotions are not personal feelings arising from within a subject. Rather, they circulate among people, places, and within social and economic systems. As such, emotions, and the way they are expressed and valued are deeply intertwined with, produced, and regulated by broader social, political, economic, and cultural structures. From this relational perspective, emotions can serve to maintain and reproduce power structures but can also be mobilised to challenge and resist these structures, and thereby contribute to the construction and negotiation of subjectivities (Ahmed, 2004, 2014/2004; Wright, 2012). Viewed in this way, emotions, as non-individual and deeply social phenomena, provide a valuable analytic lens to better understand broader structures and power dynamics and the interrelation between personal experiences and social structures. Specifically, focusing on "the sensory nature of precarity" deepens existing understandings of precarious labour (Allison, 2013). Exploring precarity through an emotional lens allows us to move beyond a purely economic analysis of precarity and its effects, and instead shed light on less tangible dynamics that often remain hidden such as the lived experiences of precarity, and the ambivalences and difficulties accompanying precarious labour.

4. Humanitarianism and Neoliberalism in Jordan

Since the outbreak of the war in Syria, Jordan saw an increase in humanitarian organisations, although many were already present before due to Palestinian and Iraqi displacement. Little is known about the organisations' influence on Jordan's economy, but the presence of aid organisations creates various opportunities and jobs. In line with a wider global phenomenon, the humanitarian sector is becoming more important as a source of employment (Pascucci, 2019, pp. 744, 748). These organisations are part of Jordan's aid regime that is characterised by neoliberal arrangements: The government has little involvement in humanitarian assistance, except concerning, e.g., security matters via the Ministry of Interior (Wizārat Al-Dākhliyya) and involvement of the Ministry of Social Development (Wizārat Al-Tanmiyya Al-ʾĀjtimāʿiyya) predominantly concerning the approval for NGO projects (Al-Adem et al., 2018; Pasha, 2021). Instead, the government outsources the responsibility for aid provision to NGOs and private sector actors (Campbell & Tobin, 2016). However, the Jordanian regime is involved in the aid sector through Royal NGOs. These, created by royal decree and headed by members of the Hashemite Royal family, are some of Jordan's larger national NGOs and play a key role in aid provision (Maqableh, 2023, pp. 112–115; Sato, 2020).

Neoliberal restructuring started in Jordan in the late 1980s (Sukarieh, 2016, p. 1209). During a time of economic challenges, the Jordanian government turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) for financial support, both of which had been pressuring for reforms in Jordan for several years (Harrigan et al., 2006). After entering into agreements with the IMF and the WB, Jordan introduced several structural adjustment policies, and its political economy became characterised by a focus on free markets,

minimal government intervention, labour market flexibility and deregulation, emphasis on the private sector, reduced public sector employments, privatisations, and cuts in government spending (Baylouny, 2008, pp. 292–294; Lenner & Turner, 2019, pp. 71–73). These neoliberal policies were integrated into but also unsettled by existing societal dynamics, e.g., stark inequalities, rural-urban divisions, family and tribe relations, oligarchic networks rooted in British and Ottoman colonial rule, and Jordanian state-building processes (Baylouny, 2008; Lenner & Turner, 2019, pp. 71, 74; Pascucci, 2019, pp. 747–748; Sukarieh, 2016, pp. 1209–1210). Precarity and precarious labour are therefore not exceptions, but rather enduring structural features of Jordan's modern era that neoliberal policies exacerbated (Munck, 2013; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Pascucci, 2019, p. 747).

Jordan has high unemployment rates, reaching 23,1% in 2022 ("Jordan unemployment rate," 2023). With reduced public sector employment, the humanitarian industry became attractive to work in. However, the humanitarian industry is also subject to neoliberalisation and marketisation. This is visible, e.g., in various aid programmes focusing on responsibilisation, entrepreneurialism, and resilience (Anholt & Sinatti, 2020; Campbell & Tobin, 2016; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Lenner & Turner, 2019). It also affects aid professionals, both in their work practices and labour conditions. Humanitarian organisations operate "in a market of donors," and therefore predominantly work to create "good projects" through which they will receive funding from donors (Krause, 2014). The focus is on satisfying donors, rather than recipients, thereby ensuring the organisation's survival. Increasingly, there is a results-based management style with a focus on outcomes that can be measured, rather than actual change (Krause, 2014; Viterna & Robertson, 2015; Ward, 2021). Because of the marketisation of aid, most projects are short-term and there is little funding for long-term sustainable projects. This in turn leads to short-term contracts for employees, as job security depends on funding. These neoliberal structures are accompanied by structures of ongoing coloniality which means that precarious labour conditions are differentially distributed between national and international professionals, which is discussed below (Farah, 2020; Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019).

5. Methodology

This article is based on one year of fieldwork in Amman, Jordan, between 2021 and 2022, and interviews with 39 aid professionals working or having worked in Jordan. This encompasses 28 national aid workers and 11 international aid workers who have experience working for a variety of NGOs, ranging from small neighbourhood-level national NGOs to larger national Royal NGOs, to large international NGOs (INGOs) with main offices in the US or Europe. These NGOs provide aid for refugees from different countries in urban areas and refugee camps, as well as to vulnerable Jordans, and work on issues such as water, sanitation and hygiene, livelihood, protection, gender-based violence, and education. Interlocutors were between their late 20s and early 40s and had different levels of experience, varying from entry-level to mid-career to senior level. Interlocutors were initially recruited via purposive sampling, through LinkedIn, and consequently, snowball sampling. Interviews were recorded, for which consent was given. With some aid professionals, follow-up interviews were conducted which were sometimes recorded. During less formal follow-ups, notes were taken. The interviews took place in coffee places in Amman, and occasionally in interlocutors' houses or offices. Due to Covid-19 precautions or physical distance, some interviews took place online. They lasted between one to four hours, averaging two hours. Interviews were semi-structured: I used a list of questions as a general guide that we could easily move away from and focused on letting my interlocutors speak freely, as I wanted to talk about topics that mattered most to them. In addition, I attended three workshops for nationals working in

humanitarian aid. During these workshops, I took notes that I wrote out in my fieldnotes afterwards. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, all data was anonymised, and names used in this article are pseudonyms. Data was analysed through an inductive thematic analysis, and themes and patterns were identified from the data through several coding cycles.

6. Subjective Stories

Many aid professionals I spoke with mentioned feelings of insecurity related to their work. In this section, I focus on aid workers' emotions around precarity to explore their experiences of precarity and its effects.

6.1. Frozenness

Nadia's words in this article's introduction point to a state of frozenness and paralysis of the mind due to constant worries about money. This sentiment of feeling frozen, considered a trauma response in psychology in addition to traditional fight or flight responses (Seltzer, 2015), was expressed in different ways by other aid workers who mentioned continuous money-related concerns and an inability to think critically. Yasmin, a national with much experience in the aid sector who now works for a large INGO, told me she felt like "you are running after the bread you need." I asked if she could elaborate:

> People keep you at this limit where you are constantly fighting for your basic needs….You don't really reach your potential, *'ānta* [translation: you] you're only busy to provide for your family. You don't have the luxury of time even to think or challenge anyone. *Khalaṣ* [translation: enough/finished/stop] they keep you busy with basic things.

Like Nadia, Yasmin experiences an inability to think due to an ongoing struggle for basic needs and survival, leaving little room or energy to question or contest someone or to develop one's capabilities and aspirations as fully as one would like. Both illustrate the impact of financial precarity, despite having an income, on one's job as an aid worker and one's personal life. Working for an INGO, Yasmin's income is higher than if she worked in most other sectors in Jordan. Nationals' salaries in INGOs range between approximately 1000–1200 Jordanian dinar (JD) per month. This is significantly more than the average 400–600 JD per month that people earn in other sectors. However, financial stress persists, predominantly due to the high cost of living in Amman. In 2018, the city was ranked the most expensive city in the Arab world and 28th worldwide, and the high cost of living remained a concern for many since then ("Asian and European cities," 2018; Ghaith, 2022). Furthermore, many national professionals are aware of internationals' much higher salaries, varying between 4000–6000 JD per month (and can increase in senior positions), and their additional work benefits such as coverage of accommodation, traveling and shipping expenses, and occasionally children's education costs. Nationals' understanding of their financial insecurity is shaped by their awareness of this disparity. Yasmin and Nadia's words highlight how these worries hinder critical thinking, limit mental space and energy to engage in meaningful reflection and potentially criticise the structures in which one is working, and impede self-development and the possibility to thrive. These feelings are not isolated individual experiences but rather point to precarity's paralysing and demobilising effects.

6.2. Worries, Unsafety, and Vulnerability

During our conversation, Majid and Sara, a husband and wife working in aid, share their feelings about job insecurity, especially since Sara struggles to find a job. The following shows a part of our conversation:

> Sara: For me I think I am counting on him….If he had no job where, how can we live. How can we do the basic, the basic I mean *yʿanī* [translation: like/meaning].
>
> Majid: We are all depending on my work, my current work, if I lose my work for donation problems or [something] like that, she saw many families that had problems, family got problems, divorce for example, just because there is no one working.
>
> Sara: Or [they got] depression. Yea. It's scary.
>
> Majid: I love my work, but of course I don't feel safe. I don't feel that this work must be my main source of income, because maybe in September, they tell me we have no fund to extend your contract. So I have to look for another job, maybe this takes one month, one year, I don't know.

The possibility of Majid losing his job scares them, particularly since they rely on his income. Majid feels unsafe in his work due to his job's unpredictability, which is tied to the organisation's dependency on funding and donors. Moreover, if Majid lost his job, it would be difficult to find a new job due to Jordan's high unemployment rates, as Sara struggles with. These feelings of fear and unsafety are intricately linked to the aid sector's precarious labour conditions that are marked by instability and unpredictability. They are rooted in the constant threat of losing one's livelihood and (the anticipation of) navigating these circumstances. These precarious conditions cause Majid and Sara to worry about their personal lives and relationship, as they see how it has affected other families negatively. Short contracts are a central theme in my conversations with aid professionals. When I tell Samar, a national who worked for various INGOs, about my research, she replies:

> I think it's so important. Because, really, many people here who are working in the humanitarian sector, many people I'm telling you, they are struggling actually. Especially because it's like limited contract. It's all projects, so it's limited, limited contract.

Samar explains that because humanitarian aid is project-based, as discussed by Krause (2014), employees get short and "limited contracts." Later in our interview, she returns to this:

> As I said before, because it's limited contract, sometimes you don't feel that you are stable. You are always thinking: "Okay, what if? What will happen if the project ends?" That makes you always alert, and that you are looking for another job. *Yʿanī*, I don't want to sit at home. I don't, you know, because there's many people in the [labour] market who want to work. I think it's [the same] for everyone working in the humanitarian sector. If you talk to many people, they will tell you the same: "It's a limited contract. It's a limited contract." This is the struggle of these people, *yʿanī* of this sector.

The limited contracts and her job's temporariness affect Samar, as she always feels alert and expresses a sense of caution and preparedness for the possibility of losing her job. Like Majid and Sara, Samar's

vigilance and worries stem from the precarious nature of her funding-dependent work. As Samar indicates, these struggles are widely-shared, especially given Jordan's current labour market and the aid sector's broader context where, as mentioned by many interlocutors, funds are increasingly directed away from Jordan, because the Syrian crisis has been ongoing for many years (despite being unresolved and many people still living in dire circumstances) and redirected to Ukraine. Leen, who worked for multiple national and international aid organisations, questioned if NGOs aim to mitigate possible negative effects on Jordan's economy:

> I don't know how much NGOs collectively work to not cause any kind of economic disruption for Jordan….But like humanitarians, I think their time is wasted and they don't live a quality life. Maybe being always fatigue[d], especially field people. Which really eliminates [the ability]…to think of other skills around them so they can survive at the end of the day, after the end of this [NGO] exit, or downsizing.

Connecting her concerns to humanitarians, Leen sees their time as wasted and underutilised, as their work hinders the development of skills needed in case of layoffs or INGOs' departure from Jordan. Like others, Leen discusses a sense of preparedness and the need to survive that prevents people from thinking long-term and living a good life. These elements of precarious labour hit nationals harder and this "differential distribution of precarity" (Pascucci, 2019) makes nationals feel more exposed to insecurity and not on an equal footing with internationals. Yasmin stated that: "You feel vulnerable sometimes, as a local you are vulnerable because you know you don't have that power of an expat." She expressed that, as a Jordanian, she feels disadvantaged in accessing job opportunities compared to internationals, and that despite nationals having equal or more experience at times, internationals tend to be promoted to managerial positions with higher salaries. All national interlocutors discussed these differential aspects and the majority of internationals recognised this. Yet international professionals also experience precarity in their work, such as Yara and Chloé, two colleagues from the same European country who worked for the same INGO. We sit outside a cafe at night, talking about their sector's insecurity. After enduring prolonged uncertainty about her job contract renewal, ultimately causing what she described as a mental breakdown, Yara took matters into her own hands and looked for a different job. Although she enjoyed working at the organisation and wanted to stay, the prolonged insecurity shaped her decision. The following is an excerpt from our conversation:

> Yara: I think one of the most challenging aspects of this work is not having any stability. So you have to compromise yourself and accept the fact that you will never have stability in this job. So that's why I get this mental breakdown, because I was sure about something [contract renewal and stability] that I couldn't expect from this job, from this sector, from this field. This is really frustrating….I was speaking with my dad, and he would say: "Well maybe not now but in some years, you will buy a house." And I say: "No, why should I buy a house in [home country]?" And I would not even buy a house here [Jordan], because I don't know where, what will happen with me….Also the personal life, your relationship, family sphere, it's really compromised, because you really have to compromise a lot, and it's not easy, and there is no solution….You don't have a house at the end of the day because you always have to move. So maybe I think twice if I want to buy, like, just—
>
> Chloé: Tables.

> Yara: Tables or, like, a lamp because I don't actually know where I will be. Maybe I will be on the other side of the world, how can I get that? Family, if you want to grow your family, okay, then you're going to marry, and then if you want children, which, like, language, the culture, which, where do I want to?…So you're always like one foot in one country and the other foot in another. It's super lost and exhausting….You never know what will happen to you, who should you trust.

Yara navigates the difficulties of working abroad, which are heightened by the sector's labour conditions that leave her uncertain about her (near) future. Her frustration and exhaustion illustrate the precarious nature of the sector, fostering insecurity. Unable to see a solution, Yara feels compelled to compromise a lot, especially in her personal life. This affective state stems from feeling divided between two countries and grappling with labour conditions that create precarity and fail to provide stability and security, leaving her depleted and disheartened. Although her experiences differ from nationals working and living in their own country, Yara's emotions resemble those of nationals like Samar, Sara, and Majid and are rooted in the same insecure labour conditions. These conditions mean that aid professionals must navigate "a labour regime that fundamentally undermines fixed temporality" (Molé, 2012, p. 52). The reported insecurity and feelings of perpetual worry characterising everyday life lead to an inability to build one's life, and the future becomes frightening rather than filled with potential (Allison, 2013; Pentaraki & Dionysopoulou, 2019).

6.3. Tiredness and Agitation

While talking with Dana who currently works for a big INGO, she discusses her work pressure:

> When it comes to work, they put too much on one employee. They expect a lot from them, and the way they have way too many projects but not enough staff, and still now we are cutting staff so yeah. It is stressful actually. Like, sometimes I go home and I just want to sit with my kid, and I don't have [the] energy to do it because I've been working all day, like, really working and I keep thinking: "I should finish this, and I have deadline for this and that." And I continue thinking about it.

Dana's emotional experience provides a window into precarity's effects. Like Sara and Majid she talks about work impacting her relationship with her family. However, Dana's stress and tiredness do not come from short-term contracts, but from her heavy workload and the organisation being understaffed. She lacks the energy to spend quality time with her child, while after work she continues thinking about her job. She mentions she feels burned out and I ask her if she can elaborate:

> Like, really, I feel like I am in survival mode all the time. Like I'm just trying to survive this week and I say next week will be better and next week comes and it's the same. And [it's] this loop of always just getting to survive the week. And I feel like I reached the point where I have no energy to do more work. Even if I have something major, a task, for example, a donor report is coming, and you have to prepare for him and write, like, our section of it…I feel like I have no energy. But still, I go and do [it], I don't have a choice.

Again Dana mentions her lack of energy, but now in relation to her ability to do her work. Despite her tiredness and high workload, she does not feel like she can refuse tasks. Furthermore, she is in a constant "survival mode," only focusing on making it through the week, hoping that next week her situation will improve but it never

does. Dana feels stuck in this loop that impacts her well-being to a point where her main concern is surviving and enduring her work, potentially leading to the inability to think beyond her immediate day-to-day tasks and needs. After talking more about her stress, she suddenly states:

> But in general, I don't want to sound negative, because I'm still grateful for my work, for my job. I enjoy most of the time, like, working, doing that type of work, but I am stressed out, and I feel that I reached that. I wish it's, like, better, I hope it will change, I don't know.

It seemed like after discussing some negative aspects of her work, Dana felt the need to emphasise her gratitude for her work. This could be connected to Jordan's high unemployment rates, making Dana appreciate simply having a job. She later added that the humanitarian sector is still "much better than other fields," despite her own stress and desire for improvement, which could relate to the sector's relatively high salaries. Internationals also struggle with high workloads and burnout. While talking with Sophie, who is from a Western country, worked in the sector in various countries and positions, and now works for a small Jordanian NGO, she explains:

> And I see that with a lot of people, you burn out. You do this work for a short period, and you run very fast for a short period of time, and then it's done. And so you continuously have a new person who runs this kind of relay race, you know, that you keep passing the baton to someone else, who then burns himself out again, and then the next, and the next, and the next.

The cyclical pattern described indicates a systemic issue of precarity where people feel overworked and burned out. These high workloads and intense periods of stress also come up during my conversation with Adelina. She has many years of experience and currently works at a large INGO in Jordan that works remotely for vulnerable Syrians inside Syria. I ask how her job impacts her:

> I could see myself, I have like two or three months of continuous stress, I become very agitated. You become reckless, not reckless, impatient. You don't have patience with the taxi driver, like, "why did he take me there, he could not take me in five minutes there?" Like, it's not his fault, your patience and tolerance level decreased quite significantly. That's one. And then of course your relationships get impacted because you know, you're not at peace, you're not calm, you can't judge a situation properly. So it did impact [me]. My husband keeps saying every single time I write a report: "So I'll not see you for three or four months." Because you are going to be in that space, headspace. And I literally don't feel like cooking, I don't feel like—I love dancing in the house, just music and just as a nice moment, I don't do that….You become distant.

She explains the effects of work stress and describes how she does not feel "at peace" or "calm" which impairs her judgment. This also impacts her personal relations, like with her husband whom she becomes distant from during intense work periods. Her feelings of agitation and short temper reflect the pressure she is under. Although the source is different for Adelina and Dana, their affective experiences are similar to Sara and Majid who worry about how losing their job would impact their family life. Additionally, Adelina notes that during these times, she can no longer engage in activities that bring her joy, like dancing. Many interlocutors described similar emotions resulting from the sector's precarious labour conditions due to high workloads and organisations being understaffed. The social fragmentation and disconnectedness that Dana and Adelina's

stories reveal are in line with earlier studies (e.g., Allison, 2013; Molé, 2012) describing that precarity can lead to individualisation and desocialisation. During my conversation with Isa, who works at a small organisation founded by internationals, she also tells me about the high levels of turnover and burnout in the sector: "You do see organisations here that have very high turnover rates and there's a reason. A lot of times people are so burned [out]." When I ask her if this is something she experienced herself she replies:

> Yeah, yeah. Especially the high intensity and like, "oh you have to get this done or like this," or often you are short-staffed and all this other stuff. I mean I had an anxiety dream about work the other night. We all have these things, like, every job has stress, but I think with these types of jobs, you do feel this unnatural level of [stress]. Kind of, like, I shouldn't be up at night thinking about this.

She recognises that all jobs involve levels of stress, but according to Isa this type of work involves an "unnatural level" of stress. Towards the end of the interview, I ask her what her advice is for the sector:

> Really making sure organisations are accountable for their staff and kind of like you don't burn people into the ground. They will leave, they will go to the private sector and make twice as much money. And I know, personally, even for me, I hit a point where it's not like I want to leave non-profit work. It's just more like, okay what are other avenues that I can help others without feeling like [this]. Like the other day, I was really feeling burnt out and I was just like: "I don't help anyone."

Aid professionals' commitment to alleviate suffering paradoxically might make them more vulnerable to exploitation. Their motivation potentially leads to prioritising the humanitarian cause, and thus their work, over personal well-being. For professionals like Isa, leaving the aid sector is therefore a viable option not because they want to. Rather, it is a response to the pervasive fatigue and burnout indicative of the current humanitarian labour regime.

7. Precarious Subjectivities

In the previous section, I discussed the subjective stories and emotions that aid professionals expressed in relation to their precarious labour conditions. By understanding emotions as conceptualised by scholars such as Lutz (1988), Hochschild (2009), and Ahmed (2004, 2014/2004) and considering them as deeply social and political, I utilized emotions as a lens to explore aid workers' experiences of precarity. Rather than being isolated occurrences or individual reactions, these emotions must be understood as deeply embedded in the socio-economic and political structures that shape humanitarian labour in Jordan. These emotions provide valuable insights into the lived experiences and less visible dynamics of precarity and show what generates precarity for aid professionals as well as precarity's effects. This precarity consists of exploitative labour conditions that are structural in the aid sector and therefore almost impossible to escape. Aid professionals are stuck in a catch-22 where (especially for nationals) leaving is not a realistic option as this will leave them unemployed and unable to survive, which preoccupies their minds and everyday lives. Looking at emotions allows us to see the difficulties and ambivalences of being caught in this situation and sheds light on the dilemmas produced by structurally precarious conditions. In Jordan's humanitarian sector, the configuration of labour under the intersection of neoliberal conditions, dynamics of marketisation and casualisation, and structures of ongoing coloniality gives rise to what I call precarious subjectivities, where aid professionals have a heightened sense of vigilance and feel in a perpetual state of fighting to survive, devoid of the luxury

and time to contemplate or criticise, and feel that their "minds are frozen." Underlying these feelings is a fundamental sense of unsafety, vulnerability, and instability that generates a permanent state of survival mode in aid workers' professional and personal lives.

In line with earlier studies (Muñoz-Arce & Duboy-Luengo, 2023; Pentaraki & Dionysopoulou, 2019; Reininger et al., 2022), this research showed that precarity affects not only aid-recipients as is often thought, but also university-educated professionals such as aid workers. Prior studies on aid work discussed the uneven distribution of labour precarity and the intersection between existing (colonial) power inequalities and labour conditions (Farah, 2020; Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019). This study builds upon these works but adds a layer of complexity by looking at precarity through the lens of emotions and shows the comparability of the above-mentioned emotions and experiences of precarity between national and international aid professionals. Given that precarity is unequally distributed, the commonality of emotions and experiences is noteworthy. Furthermore, reflecting earlier findings (Muñoz-Arce & Duboy-Luengo, 2023; Pentaraki & Dionysopoulou, 2019), this study demonstrated that precarity has significant effects on aid workers' personal and professional lives. Precarity impacts aid workers' sense of self, interpersonal relations, relation to the world and work, and their ability to do their work. By focusing on emotions, this study shed light on how aid professionals' coping mechanisms, developed in response to precarious labour conditions, impact social relations and their private lives. These findings resonate with earlier studies (Allison, 2013; Molé, 2012) that mention that precarity can engender social disconnectedness and desocialisation. However, in their professional lives and in contrast to Molé's (2012) work where precarity leads to acts of mobbing and labour exclusion, most aid professionals mentioned turning to colleagues for support and care to deal with their struggles. This difference in sociality might be explained by the emotionally difficult nature of aid work, and its lack of comprehensibility to outsiders, which promotes bonding amongst aid workers, but simultaneously might make them more vulnerable to exploitation. The relation between (de)sociality and precarity is an important area for future research.

Reininger et al. (2022) argue that precarity, precariousness, and resistance must be understood as a continuum. This article does not sufficiently address resistance and alternatives to dominant power structures and precarious conditions and further research is needed. However, by looking at emotions around precarity, this article not only deepens our understanding of precarity and its effects but also offers tentative insights into why precarious work engenders resistance or not. As Ahmed (2004, 2014/2004) argues, emotions can help to maintain or resist power dynamics. The sense of frozenness, perpetual survival mode, and feelings of instability discussed in this article show how precarity debilitates and paralyses people and is thereby demobilising and potentially hinders resistance. Furthermore, although these conditions are collectively experienced, they are not recognised as such but as individual concerns. This captures how neoliberalism and precarity operate: they individualise problems and responsibility, thereby undermining the potential for collective resistance. This does not imply subjugation or acceptance of precarious labour conditions, nor does it negate the agency or power of these aid professionals. However, the sense of being frozen and unable to move is an affective state that should be understood on the continuum of precarity and resistance, not as a state of acceptance or compliance, but as an outcome of precarity's debilitating effects that prevent resistance from arising.

8. Conclusions

This article looked at the ways the labour regime of Jordan's humanitarian sector, influenced by neoliberal policies and marketisation dynamics, is lived and experienced. These experiences and the inner affective states of aid professionals cannot be understood outside of broader socio-political and economic contexts. By looking at emotions and feelings around precarious labour conditions, I argued that precarious subjectivities are produced by the way humanitarian aid is currently structured and organised. The experiences described in this article are not just individual anecdotes or struggles. Rather, they are reflections of the systemic way humanitarian labour is structured that produces these difficulties and precarious subjectivities. As the words of the people in this article have shown, precarity affects one's sense of self and one's sense of place in the world. For the aid workers I spoke with, the effects were multifaceted and complex. Not only did it lead to a sense of instability and feelings of unsafety, for some it also meant living in a constant state of alertness and survival mode with limited capacity to think and challenge. This has consequences beyond aid workers themselves as it can also affect the way they do their work. It can lead to a focus on tried-and-tested practices and programmes, repeating the same thing, and avoiding risk. As short-term results and easily measurable indicators are encouraged, there is less room for innovation and creativity that is needed to develop aid and care that is context-specific and more durable in the long run. The experiences of aid professionals such as Nadia, Adelina, Majid, and Sara are not unique to aid workers and many other workers around the world have similar experiences as labour is increasingly casualised. The findings of this study therefore hold significance for studying labour conditions and precarity beyond the aid sector. Adopting an emotional lens provides opportunities to elucidate precarity more broadly, including its causes and effects, and the way people respond to and/or resist precarity or not.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

Brigit Ronde is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Social Sciences at Oslo Metropolitan University. Building on critical humanitarian, postcolonial, and decolonial studies, she explores aid professionals' experiences and navigation of tensions and power dynamics in the humanitarian sector in Jordan. She obtained her master's degree at the University of Amsterdam, where she focused on students' feelings of radical insecurity in Beirut, Lebanon. Her research interests revolve around lived experiences of structures of inequality, resistance, subjectivity, labour, and precarity.

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ARTICLE

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Sociological Types of Precarity Among Gig Workers: Lived Experiences of Food Delivery Workers in Riga

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the lived experiences of precariousness in gig work, a growing sector of the modern labor market, through the case of Latvia, a former Soviet republic that has experienced radical neo-liberalization over the last 30 years. Many studies, mainly focusing on the Global North, have demonstrated precarious aspects of gig work—its short-term engagements, the lack of legal protection and social benefits, and algorithmic management as an autonomy-limiting control mechanism. Given the precarious nature of gig work, we examine why people engage in it. Building on literature that distinguishes precarity as a condition and precariousness as a subjective experience, we analyze reasons for engaging in gig work in Latvia. We identify five types of gig workers based on 56 in-depth interviews with food delivery gig workers in Riga, the capital of Latvia. We analyze differences in our respondents' motivations for choosing this work, their position, and historical mobility in the social structure. Based on this analysis, we find three factors that serve as a basis for a typology of food delivery workers in Riga: gig workers' view of gig work as a temporary vs. a long-term engagement, the breadth of perceived opportunities available, and their emotional satisfaction with the job. We discuss how these findings compare with other studies on gig work and gig workers' subjective experiences.

Keywords

Eastern Europe; gig economy; gig work; Latvia; neoliberalism; platforms; precariousness; precarity

1. Introduction: Research Rationale

With the platform economy on the rise, an increasing number of people across the globe choose platform work as their primary or supplementary source of income. Known as the "gig economy," "gig" denotes a short-term arrangement, one carried out traditionally by a musician but more recently by a diversity of so-called "gig workers" (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). Platforms attract workers promising unprecedented autonomy and flexibility, while an increasing number of studies document the precarious nature of gig work (Barratt et al., 2020; MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Ravenelle, 2019; Zwick, 2017). We use narratives of food delivery workers in Latvia, a neo-liberal Eastern European society, to deepen our understanding of why job seekers choose to work for platforms despite their precarity. Building upon 56 in-depth interviews with food delivery couriers in Riga, we divide our respondents into five types. Each has a distinctive experience; some experience gig work as a trap due to precarious conditions shaped by post-Soviet neoliberalism, while others use gig work to reduce the precariousness of their lives.

Precarity as a labor condition became prominent with the decline of secure industrial employment and the rise of the service economy and financial capitalism in the 1970s, prompted by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as "a theory of political economy," suggested "that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Such ideas contributed to the state and employers increasingly withdrawing from guaranteeing workers' social security and lifelong employment. Workers were socialized to think of themselves as rational decision-makers who compete for jobs in the labor market or, ideally, become entrepreneurs. Since then, precarity as a labor condition has been associated with insecure, temporary, and short-term employment, leaving workers anxious about their future (Kalleberg, 2009; Millar, 2017).

One could say that the rise of the platform economy has brought neoliberal ideology and precarious working conditions to their extreme (Ravenelle, 2019; Schor et al., 2020). Classification and treatment of gig workers as independent contractors shifts all the risks of the free market from platforms to the workers (Altenried, 2021; Barratt et al., 2020; Mendonça et al., 2023; Ravenelle, 2019). Algorithmic management and the asymmetric distribution of information leave gig workers with minimal control over their working conditions (Shibata, 2020). Platforms promote themselves as spaces where workers can unleash their entrepreneurial skills. They frame and render workers responsible for their precarity (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019) and disguise such labor relations under euphemisms of "flexibility," "workers' autonomy," and "freedom" (Shibata, 2020; Zwick, 2017).

Although the precarity of working conditions across various platforms and diverse socio-geographical contexts can be demonstrated, it is also recognized that the experience of gig work and the precarity associated with it are very heterogeneous (Altenried, 2021; Schor et al., 2020). Due to the lax regulation of employment relations, platforms draw together workers from socially diverse groups and life situations. Individual rationales for pursuing gig work and the subsequent experience of gig work vary even if the formal working conditions are the same. Therefore, to get a fuller picture of precarity in gig work, it is essential to uncover how gig workers with diverse social positions experience these precarious labor conditions in various political and socio-economic contexts.

To address and uncover this heterogeneity of experiences, we follow Millar's (2017) invitation to use Butler's (2016) distinction between precariousness and precarity and examine how precarity as a condition constitutes lived experience. Butler (2016) suggests that precariousness is a universal feature of all lives. Lives are precarious by definition, "they can be expunged at will or by accident," and "their persistence is in no sense guaranteed" (Butler, 2009, p. 25). To be sustained, human life requires a set of social and economic institutions; therefore, "*precariousness* [of life] implies living socially," i.e., "one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (Butler, 2009, p. 14). Butler uses the term "precarity" to refer to differential protection against precariousness in a given society. It is a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, 2009, p. 25). This includes different welfare and labor regimes, differential distribution of wealth but also differential representation of specific populations as less worthy of life than others. Precariousness as an ontological and universally shared condition does not permit specific contexts under which human experience occurs since it claims that we all come into existence as precarious beings that need protection. Precarity as a political condition allows us to specify regimes and institutions under which the human experience of precariousness occurs.

In our study, we view precariousness as a lived experience under specific "politically induced" (Butler, 2016) conditions that frame also the precarity of labor (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011). To analyze the lived experience of precarity means to look at subjective experiences. Armano et al. (2022, p. 31) suggest an analytical distinction between precarity as a "condition" and precariousness as an "experience." Dörre (2014) similarly suggests that precarity comprises structural and subjective criteria. Focus on precariousness as "experience" allows us to see subjectivity's cognitive, affective, and social aspects (Armano et al., 2022; Millar, 2014). Building on this conceptual premise, we then analyze experiences of precariousness (subjective) in platform work in Latvia, a significantly neoliberal society (structural condition).

Our study contributes to the body of research on the rationales behind the choice to engage in gig work by focusing on the subjective experiences of gig workers. Lam and Triandafyllidou (2022) focus on immigrant labor and indicate several pathways for immigrants who engage in gig work in Canada, examining their objectives and perceived agency in the labor market. Another study (Altenried, 2021) sheds light on why so many immigrants are engaged in food delivery in Berlin. From those who research immigration and local experiences of labor, several studies in the US demonstrate a diversity of rationales for engagement in gig work across different types of platforms (Dunn, 2020; Ravenelle, 2019; Schor et al., 2020). Schor et al. (2020) observe that the satisfaction and perception of autonomy in gig work depend on the economic dependency level across various platforms. A rare study of gig work outside the global cities of high-income societies (Diakonidze, 2023) shows that the trade-off between gig work's flexibility and standard employment's security is not meaningful for Georgian taxi drivers because traditional standard employment is perceived as insecure.

To understand experiences of precariousness in gig work, we analyze the narratives of the food delivery workers in Riga. We have identified three dimensions that allow us to categorize the complexity of diverse experiences. The three dimensions are a temporal view of the engagement, the perceived breadth of alternative opportunities, and the emotional satisfaction they gain from this work. As a result, we found five types of food delivery gig workers.

2. Neoliberal Context of Precariousness Experience in Post-Soviet Latvia

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Latvia went through fairly radical neo-liberalization (Appel & Orenstein, 2016; Bohle & Greskovits, 2007). The need to "adopt neoliberal reforms was especially pressing" to "geopolitical[ly] realign from East to West" (Appel & Orenstein, 2016, pp. 317–318). In comparison to the Western countries where neoliberalism was adopted in the context of a solid middle class (Mau, 2015), the neoliberal reforms in the former post-Soviet republics, including Latvia, were installed in the context where a large part of society was economically disadvantaged (Eglitis & Lace, 2009).

The growth of the Latvian economy was based primarily on consumption and mortgage loans, not industry or agriculture (Hudson, 2014). Hudson describes the post-Soviet neo-liberalization in Latvia as "the evolving financial exploitation, trade dependency, and low-wage policy advanced by Washington and the international financial institutions" (Hudson, 2014, para. 7). This neoliberal approach deepened after the 2008 crisis when the state chose to bail out banks and downsized welfare (Ozoliņa, 2019; Sommers & Woolfson, 2014). Throughout those transformations, Latvian "ruling parties and politicians…embraced the view that the market economy would sort out problems of economic marginality and that there was no critical need for a socially oriented policy" (Eglitis & Lace, 2009, p. 332). Such neo-liberalization in Latvia led to marked income and wealth inequality (Brzeziński et al., 2020, p. 12; Eglitis & Lace, 2009) and comparatively low mean household wealth (Brzeziński et al., 2020, p. 5). These neoliberal transformations could not generate sufficient conditions capable of minimizing the precariousness of life (Butler, 2016).

Labor conditions in post-Soviet Latvia should be seen as embedded in the post-Soviet neoliberal context. For two decades following independence, the state-defined minimum wage in Latvia remained significantly lower than the state-defined subsistence level consumer basket. One-third of all workers received minimum wages. In 2022, the shadow economy constituted 26.5% of GDP, the most significant component being undeclared employment (Sauka & Putnins, 2023). With few exceptions, labor unions have mainly been weak (Sommers & Woolfson, 2014). In this context, gig work, often described as precarious work in the literature (see, for example, Barratt et al., 2020; MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Mendonça et al., 2023; Ravenelle, 2019; Zwick, 2017), does not seem specifically more precarious than many other jobs available in Latvia, specifically in terms of wage and overtime pay, ability to control one's work schedule, and regulatory protection. A study on gig workers in Georgia, a former Soviet country, identifies a similar situation (Diakonidze, 2023). The gig workers we interviewed also mentioned that in their previous jobs, they had high workloads and thus could not maintain a work–life balance. Others found their income in their primary jobs insufficient, so they chose gig work to attain additional income. Hudson (2014), when writing on post-Soviet neo-liberalization in Latvia, calls this "anti-labor, anti-industrial, pro-rentier extremism" that is not contested by workers because they are "distracted" by the ethnic conflict between Latvians and the Russian-speaking population and unaware "how different this neoliberal policy is from that followed by Western social democracies" (Hudson, 2014, para. 6).

Besides these labor conditions, neoliberalism in Latvia also entails specific ethical and cultural regimes. As an ethical regime, it expects one to work on oneself and to be self-entrepreneurial (Ozoliņa, 2019). Ozoliņa (2019), in her ethnography of the Latvian State Employment Agency, finds that there are institutions and programs to support the unemployed. However, they are often inefficient and overemphasize the unemployed individual's responsibility to deal with their situation. As a cultural regime, neoliberalism uses "cultural and traditional values,"

as well as emotions, such as the "fears" of immigrants and communists, to survive and legitimize itself (Harvey, 2005, p. 39). Harvey (2005) writes that "the neoliberal state needs nationalism of a certain sort to survive" (p. 85). In the 1990s, such nationalism in Latvia formed in an ethnic frame. Firstly, it was directed against the Latvian Russian-speaking community, especially those who had immigrated to Latvia from other Soviet republics during the Soviet era. They were seen as remnants of the Soviet past. After the Soviet collapse, the Latvian state did not grant them citizenship or political rights. Secondly, there has been a growing "fear of 'outsiders' who may further 'dilute' the 'already-threatened' Latvian national identity" (Woolfson, 2009, p. 954). As we see also among the gig workers we interviewed, the precariousness of life was aggravated by such nationalism. All these conditions shall be considered as we analyze the experiences of gig workers in Latvia.

3. Food Delivery Platforms in Riga

Wolt began food delivery operations in Latvia in 2017 and Bolt Food in 2020. Today, by our estimates, based on platform communication in the media and other sources, Riga has about 8,500 food delivery gig workers. Most are registered as self-employed; some have established a small business or use their existing business to provide delivery services. Couriers are responsible for reporting and paying their own taxes, being able to choose between several tax regimes that vary in degree of complexity and regularity of tax reporting and the level of social insurance. Most keep their tax payments to a minimum by choosing the least insured status, underreporting income, or setting up a foreign bank account and not reporting income at all. In the case of Bolt, the option to conduct payments in cash also provides an opportunity to evade reporting. Social insurance and health insurance is an issue of courier responsibility. One exception is the Wolt platform, which has collective insurance against accidents.

The daily work of Wolt and Bolt couriers is algorithmically managed. Even though both platforms have specific rates, algorithms calculate the delivery route and time, the delivery fee of each order, and, most importantly, allocate incoming orders among the couriers. Couriers have the freedom to accept or reject an order, but the rejection of too many orders can be punished by blocking the couriers' account. Based on our observations, overall earnings largely depend on how many "well-paid" orders a gig worker receives and how little he or she has to stay idle without any orders. Even though the platforms claim that orders are allocated based on each courier's location, it is clear that many other variables affect the final output.

As seen elsewhere (Altenried, 2021), entry costs into food delivery gig work are relatively low. However, an ability to invest in appropriate equipment significantly improves couriers' labor conditions and potential to earn. The platform provides a t-shirt, a waterproof jacket, and a delivery bag (for a fee), but work safety and efficiency depend on the courier's access to an efficient means of transport, phones with longer-lasting batteries, weather-appropriate clothing, protective gear, and other equipment. Having several means of transport (e.g., bike and car) allows a courier to adjust to differences in weather and traffic. Similarly to what has been identified in other studies (Schor et al., 2020), a home base in a location with many restaurants is another asset.

4. Method

Our analysis of gig workers' experiences in Latvia is based on 56 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted from July 2022 to June 2023 with food delivery couriers working through the Wolt and Bolt

platforms in Riga. Neither platform was open to sharing any data on their courier partners. Therefore, we based our recruitment on estimates. A 2022 Wolt-funded Europe-wide survey reports that 80% of Wolt couriers are between 18 and 34 years old, and 90% are males (Wolt, 2023). Elsewhere, Wolt has stated that the majority of couriers in Latvia use cars, 20% use bikes, and 30% work full-time (Lastovska, 2020). We believe these socio-demographics relate equally to both food delivery platforms. There are no data on the proportion of immigrants in the overall courier population, but our observations suggest that, in contrast with national contexts where the vast majority of the couriers are recent immigrants (Altenried, 2021; Kalleberg, 2009; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2022), in Riga, more than half of couriers are Latvian nationals (similar to, e.g., Diakonidze, 2023).

Our sampling strategy was purposefully aimed at socio-demographic diversity in terms of age, gender, and, in the case of immigrants, the country of origin. Interviewees were recruited by circulating an invite on social media and approaching couriers on the street. Because young male students were significantly more responsive to the initial social media invite, in our subsequent recruitment, we purposefully reached out to non-students, women, and couriers above 30 to ensure that the collected material represents the diversity of experiences and life situations of food delivery gig workers in Riga. We stopped conducting interviews when we felt we had reached saturation in the scope of experiences (Mason, 2010). Saturation was reached much faster with immigrants because almost all immigrant gig workers recruited mainly on the street turned out to be international students and thus shared similar motivations for this job. The socio-demographic composition of our sample appears in Figures 1 and 2.

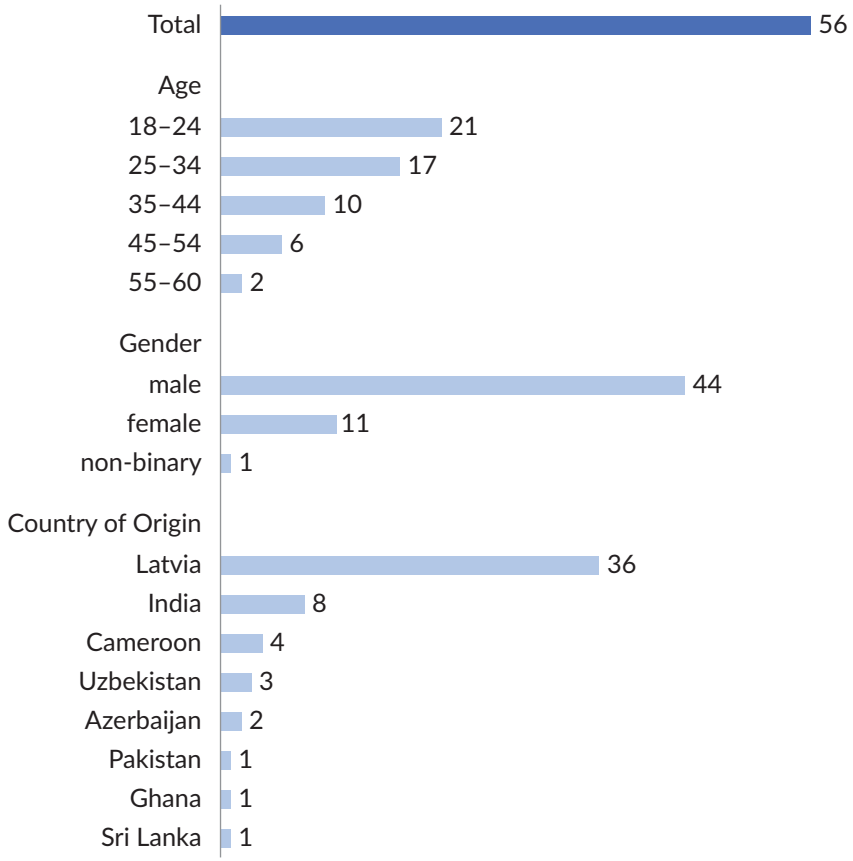

Figure 1. The number of interviewees by age, gender, and country of origin.

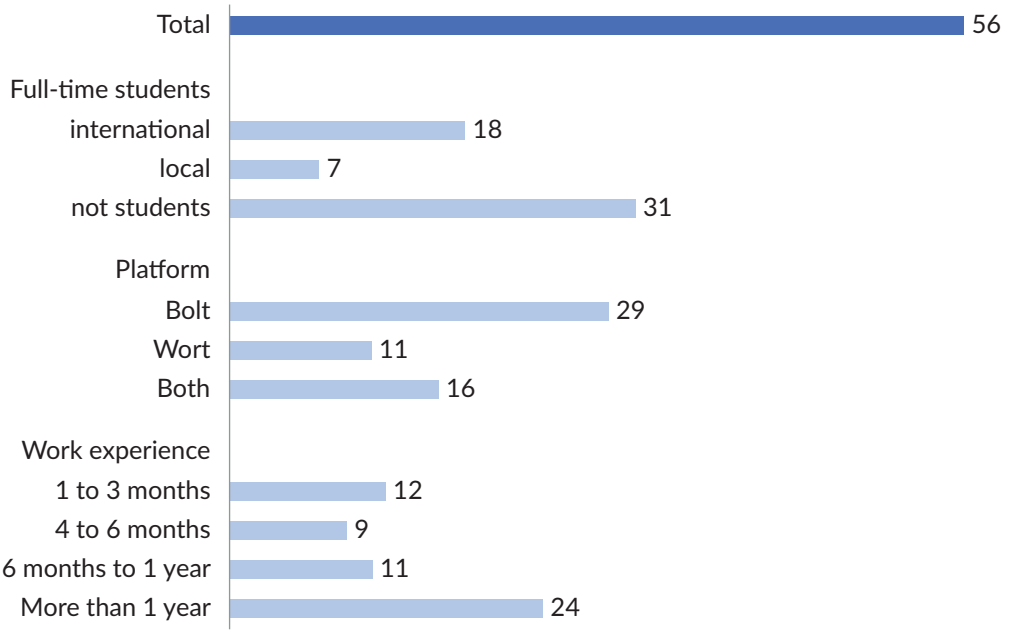

Figure 2. The number of interviewees by their current status as a student and gig work experience ($N = 56$).

Interviews varied in length from 40 minutes to two hours and 63 minutes on average. All interviews were conducted in public places after obtaining informed consent from the respondent. In each interview, we addressed the following themes: (a) career trajectories and the motivation/choice of gig work, (b) precarity and employment status, (c) daily routine and work-life balance, (d) algorithmic control and agency, (e) co-operation with other couriers and perceptions of social attitudes, and (f) subjective feelings about gig work. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were anonymized by assigning each transcript a number and each interviewee a pseudonym that was used to assign quotes in this article.

During interviews and data analysis, we paid attention to respondents' meaning-making following the reflexive approach of Giddens (1991), where a "person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). We also took into account that individual narratives are "never fully individual" and reveal "shared experiences" of various social issues (Barabasch & Merrill, 2014, p. 288). We used our "sociological imagination" to avoid respondents' experiential bias by situating their narratives and behavior in the broader context of Latvia and neoliberal capitalism.

Both authors read all the interviews twice. During the first read, we coded data according to the six themes listed above and identified emerging themes. In the second reading cycle, we focused on analyzing the lived experience of precariousness and found three dimensions that structured the diversity of reported experiences of precariousness: (a) how the respondent sees their opportunities in the labor market, (b) whether they perceive this job as permanent or temporary, and (c) how they feel about doing this work. The first dimension is related to the questions about their career trajectories and subjective job evaluation. The second dimension relates to the interview questions about gig workers' motivation for doing this job and their plans for the future. The last dimension is related to the research questions that asked about their feelings about this job, how they perceive societal attitudes toward this type of work, and how they feel about how the platform's algorithm functions. Based on these dimensions, we divided all respondents into

five groups by their approach to gig work and the level of precarity they faced. We titled these types gig work as a job, an in-between, a temporary trap, a trap, and a lifestyle. The types are presented in Table 1 and in the next section in the order of prevalence in our sample.

Table 1. Types of gig work experience.

Type	Perceived range of alternative employment opportunities	Permanent or temporary employment	Emotional orientation
An in-between	Narrow	Temporary	Neutral to positive
A temporal trap	Extremely narrow	Temporary	Positive to negative
A job	Wide	Permanent	Positive
A trap	Extremely narrow	Permanent	Negative
A lifestyle	Wide	Temporary	Neutral to positive

Since it is qualitative research, we do not claim that these types cover all the diversity of food delivery workers in terms of their precariousness. However, the data suggest that based on lived experiences of precariousness in Latvia, platform work might not be seen as more precarious than other standard and non-standard employment experiences. We would need to have a better understanding of the socio-demographics of gig workers from both platforms to be aware of any groups we might have missed or underrepresented.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Gig Work as an In-Between

The most prevalent orientation towards gig work among our respondents was what we have named "an in-between." For this type of gig worker, gig work is a temporary option that allows them to subsist between other engagements. Either they plan to finish their studies and then look for a full-time job, or they are in between two jobs, or they experience short-term difficulties that do not allow them to pursue a long-term career of their choice. Even though their perceived range of employment alternatives is relatively narrow, they believe that these are short-term difficulties, and they plan to "move on" in the long term. Emotionally, their view of gig work tends to be positive because they see it as a short-term condition that allows them to move towards their preferred way of life or maintain the life they have.

Many workers of this type are young. Other studies show that youth are generally more satisfied with "gig work" than "the older age groups" (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019, p. 10). In the current neoliberal era, youth across the globe find it more challenging to pursue linear career trajectories after high school or tertiary education (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Wyn, 2020). Families often protect these young people from the precariousness of life. However, many choose gig work to gain financial independence from their parents. A 20-year-old female second-year university student said: "[This job] fulfilled my expectations because it allowed me to move out from my parents and start living independently, to be able to buy food and other things that I wanted" (N0011). Ernests, an 18-year-old high school senior, explained: "I realized that I needed to earn some money because I turned 18, and then I didn't want to take it from my parents anymore because I'm an adult" (N0022). He and other *in-between* gig workers praise this job for its flexibility

since many of these young adults have other activities they are involved in and do not want to be interrupted by their job-related duties. For example, Ernests has an intensive schedule of folk dancing and, because of this, cannot do a regular job with a proper work schedule:

> I began to look for a job, but the first month of the summer, I mean June, was fairly busy with folk dance classes since we were training for the song and dance festival in the US. Thus, it took work to apply for any job. I could not be at work from eight to seven in the evening—I needed flexible employment. And then I found Bolt. (N0022; from here onwards, if not marked as "original," a quote is an author's translation from Latvian)

A third of young gig workers in the UK work for platforms because of a lack of other alternatives (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019, p. 10). Young Latvian adults we interviewed, however, mention that they see other opportunities in the labor market but choose gig work because it is relatively better paid than other jobs available for young people. "There was no better income elsewhere," Ernests explains (N0022).

Some adults also use gig work to fill temporary gaps in their labor market trajectories. Such gaps, increasingly common worldwide, have become more pertinent in neoliberalism, which emphasizes flexibility in employment. For example, a 52-year-old male who had retired from 20 years of service in the police did food delivery until he could buy a new car to be a taxi driver again, a job he does permanently as an additional income to his pension from the police service. Another example is 50-year-old Intars, a welder by profession, who, after the Soviet collapse, worked as a bartender and later moved abroad to work on various construction projects in Sweden, Norway, and England. He used this job as a temporary solution because his last assignment in construction, which was supposed to be in England, did not work out. He now does a food delivery job full-time and, overall, is satisfied with it but admits that his wages do not match his income abroad. In the future, therefore, he intends to look for another job abroad:

> This is a temporary job for me. I'm not going to work there for the rest of my life. I am also looking for and waiting for some new projects. Anyway, I'm leaving. I could work in Latvia, but they only want to pay you a little. I know what I know, what I can do. Because everywhere [in Latvia], they promise to pay one thing, but they pay another. (N0042)

Although this job is precarious and does not guarantee security and stability, it is the best option to solve their present needs.

5.2. Gig Work as a Temporary Trap

The second most prevalent type of orientation towards gig work among our respondents is "temporary trapped" and includes predominantly immigrant students from Asia and Africa. Their life in Riga is rather precarious due to the immigration regime and the cultural perceptions this regime creates. They have highly narrow opportunities in the labor market because of visa regulations and language barriers. Their emotional satisfaction with gig work is relatively neutral. Some are satisfied because they have a job despite the limitations imposed by the immigration regime, while others feel disappointed for not being able to access other labor market opportunities.

As elsewhere in the world, local visa regulations do not allow international undergraduate students to work for more than 20 hours per week. As long as they are undergraduates, their opportunities in the Latvian labor market are limited. Many try to find a job related to their education, such as business, accounting, or IT. Still, the companies do not value their application due to the limited hours they can work and, according to our respondents, also because they are foreigners and employers prefer nationals. Their disadvantage in the labor market might also be related to xenophobia towards other ethnicities and races in Latvia (Tumule & Milovs, 2022):

> If you want to work full-time here for someone, you must have at least a 30-hour work permit. My card shows 20 hours because I am an undergraduate….So, many employers would reject my application due to this fact. (N0026, original)

There are few other opportunities in the labor market for this type of individual, but they are limited and may conflict with their study schedule. For example, some reported having worked for a restaurant or call center at international travel companies, but it interfered with their study and sleep schedule. Some mentioned that they have tried part-time jobs and some informal employment, such as cleaning. For those reasons, a food delivery job was often represented as the only alternative. Additionally, platforms offer easy entry with practically no barriers or requirements (Altenried, 2021):

> There was no alternative, actually—the only option was Wolt couriering. But it was easy to make an account in Bolt, so I started in Bolt….It was easy to start because you don't need any interviews or job experience. And you can work whenever you want. (N0049, original)

Some reported that they saw almost no other employment alternatives. They said the few other alternatives they considered were as poorly paid as food delivery. So, doing food delivery work was a way out of the situation created by the immigration regime since the government agencies have no control over how many hours a food delivery worker is doing. In their case, food delivery gigs solve their income needs for a temporary period until they become subjects of different immigration regimes in Latvia or abroad or move back home. Nevertheless, this comes at some risk of losing one's visa. One of our respondents recalled a case where police caught an international student for a parking violation, which led to further investigation into whether he had been paying taxes for his delivery work (N0026). Our respondent was unaware if this person lost his visa—he certainly could have. In this instance, we see how gig work can aggravate precarious life situations.

5.3. Gig Work as a Job

We found that many food delivery gig workers in Riga view gig work almost as a permanent job and plan to pursue it for the foreseeable future. They either gig work full-time or combine it with other employment. They see multiple other opportunities but choose gig work because it allows them to deal with the precariousness generated by neoliberal conditions, where an ever-increasing optimization of time and efficiency expected at workplaces alienates people from one another and the self. They have a relatively positive attitude towards gig work.

Many respondents report prior experiences of hectic work schedules and high workloads that interfered with their work-life balance and care responsibilities. Some had also experienced controlling and abusive

behavior from superiors. They felt they were not able to control their lives. They argue that gig work gives them more opportunities to realize their agency and autonomy. Some have established small businesses that give satisfaction but sometimes insufficient income (for example, a bicycle repair shop or an electrical engineering service). Although entrepreneurship is welcome under neoliberal conditions, it is not always easy to sustain in practice (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019). Therefore, they choose gig work as a reliable way to compensate for insufficient or unstable income from another job or private business. Others engage in gig work full-time, working from five to seven days a week, eight to 16 hours per day, and having, reportedly, significantly higher than average income. Gig workers of this type feel positive about this job and choose gig work even though they feel they have many opportunities in the labor market.

For example, Raimonds, a 36-year-old IT professional, started delivering food between project-based IT gigs but soon realized he could earn the same money with less stress by just delivering food. He is married and has two kids. Although this job seems more precarious than what he had before, it is more compatible with his family life and care responsibilities (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020; Millar, 2014):

> IT jobs involve regular ill-treatment. Therefore, I prefer to work for myself. Then, I can be sure that nobody mistreats me. I can work when I want. I can take a vacation when I want. I can easily adjust my vacation plans to my wife's. I can babysit whenever it is needed. When my wife comes home, I can leave for work. Moreover, I do not have to worry if she is caught in traffic and is running late. I do not have to rush. I can wait for her and leave when she comes in. On sleepless nights, I can get up and Bolt. (N0009)

Another example is 35-year-old Egils. He has a degree in business administration and additional training in electrical engineering. Once we ask why he does not work in the sphere of electrical engineering, he responds:

> I have no interest in it. One situation is that you do something because you are interested in it, but this situation changes once you have to do it professionally. Deadlines, speed, you get chased all the time. No, this is not for me. (N0001)

He wanted to avoid standard work relationships with tight schedules and high demands. He found food delivery work to be compatible with his pace of life and schedule. It gives him a sense of freedom and an improved understanding of self. In both examples, their choice to do gig work is against the current market logic where aspirations for high achievements and profit dominate. However, they choose this job to ensure the well-being of their relatives and themselves (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020).

These gig workers seem to have a higher degree of control over their work. Some had worked as full-time couriers before the dawn of the platforms. They seem well-versed in how the platform functions, know their rights, are aware of algorithmic management, and therefore can assess it critically and, to a certain degree, use it for their own benefit. They work strategically, selecting specific times and places to work and switching between several means of transport (a bike, a car, an electric scooter) depending on the opportunity to minimize empty periods and get better-paid orders. Many keep in touch with other couriers and share information about demand fluctuations and the best spots to pick up orders. In this way, they can adjust their working hours to other demands in their everyday lives. For example, 24-year-old Martins has a master's degree in IT. He has worked as a video producer and has tried out multiple full-time jobs in logistics

and retail. Martins works six to seven days a week, sometimes up to 14 hours a day, and earns an average of 70 to 100 euros daily. He uses an electric unicycle he bought specifically for food delivery gigs, an investment that has long since paid off. He is also a sim racer and runs his own YouTube channel, which he believes might evolve into another source of income in the future. Martin is happy with his current way of life:

> I have friends with IT jobs and sitting in offices all day. I don't judge them. I am happy that it works for them, and they probably earn more money than I do. I prefer to keep my expenses low to be able to spend time outdoors—to experience life and movement in the city. Flexibility and freedom are essential to me. I am cautious to say "freedom" because I work a lot—14 hours a day is a lot. But I cherish the opportunity to go offline any time. I could work less. But I like this work and therefore working these long hours comes easy. (N0014)

Overall, for gig work as a job type, the availability of gig work helps them navigate their lives, giving them a sense of well-being. Similar to the other types discussed below, this type is also critical of platforms, especially the stagnation and squeezing of income. They know this job does not offer social security and often no steady flow of gigs. However, this job is better for them in the context of their former job and its work–life balance.

5.4. Gig Work as a Trap

Another type of gig worker chooses gig work because their lived experiences were shaped by the neoliberal policies and practices of the state in ways that compromise their agency. We have named this type "a trap." For them, gig work becomes a permanent job because it is the only real way they have to sustain their lives. Workers of this type are forced into gig work because they do not see other opportunities in the labor market. Due to this involuntary dimension, they do not feel good about this job. Different from gig work as a job type, they do not express much enthusiasm to understand the platform algorithm to make their work efficient. Their primary strategy is to organize their work around the busy hours that platforms advertise.

Juris, a man in his mid-40s with two degrees, in economics and law, has been pushed into gig work involuntarily by the broader political and economic circumstances dictated by financial neo-liberalization. His life situation dramatically changed following the 2008 crisis. Before the 2008 crisis, he worked as a high-level manager for a Swedish company. Since the economy was booming and he had a family with two kids, he took a mortgage for a house. As the crisis hit, the Swedish company departed Latvia and he lost his job. The Latvian economy contracted by 25%, and unemployment was over 20%. He could not find a job to pay his mortgage in this situation. The Latvian state chose to bail out banks but not the people (Sommers & Woolfson, 2014). He lost his mortgaged house to the insolvency process, after which he still owed a quarter of a million euros to banks. Since he is in insolvency, all he earns above the state-defined level is appropriated by bailiffs and debt collectors. He does this job because it gives him the autonomy not to report all income to the State Revenue Service, and thus, it allows him to maintain a dignified life for his family members. In the interview, he indicates that this income allows his family to live a decent life: "This [income] is significant for me because it allows my family to use a car or shop without calculating whether we can afford it" (N006).

Juris has worked as a gig worker since this job opportunity appeared in Latvia. He reflects that, initially, he felt as the only "white" person who did this job, implying that this is not a job to be proud of. Ravenelle (2019, p. 161), in her analysis of New York platform workers, found that feelings of shame about this job are common for those where this job has meant moving down the social ladder.

Debt has also been a reason for doing gig work for Signe, a 40-year-old single mother (N0024). She faces insolvency due to unsecured loans that she took to cover her daughter's medical fees. As a lone parent with only a primary education, she could not find herself a sufficiently high-paying job, so she has been struggling with poverty. She chose gig work because debt collectors had contacted her previous employers, which led to them changing their attitude towards her, and as a result, she decided to quit. Since, in her case, this job did not mean losing her status, she had a neutral affective disposition towards the work.

Above, we discussed how neo-liberalization in Latvia was coupled with or legitimized by nationalistic policies. This legacy has shaped Alexander's pathway to gig work. A 57-year-old Latvian Russian-speaker who got an industrial technical college education during the Soviet times, he has worked for the largest alcoholic beverage producer in the Baltic states for 27 years but recently lost his job due to downsizing. He cannot find another job because of poor Latvian language skills.

Latvian language proficiency is a state-set requirement, a legacy of Latvian post-Soviet neoliberalism and stringent nationalism. After the Soviet regime collapsed, citizenship was automatically granted to pre-1940 citizens of Latvia and their descendants. All those who had settled in Latvia during the Soviet era could get citizenship only through naturalization by proving proficiency in the Latvian language and history. Those who failed or saw the naturalization process as humiliating received the passport of a Latvian non-citizen. International organizations, for example, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, have criticized Latvia for this approach. Nevertheless, Latvia kept this discriminatory approach, rendering life for unnaturalized persons precarious.

This is also the case for Alexander. His parents came from other Soviet republics, but he was born and raised in Latvia. Failure to pass the language exam excluded him from the Latvian citizenry and restricted his opportunities in the labor market. Alexander would like to work as a taxi driver but cannot because it also requires that he pass a Latvian language exam: "At my age, I have no job in Latvia without knowledge of the language. Not at all" (N0053, translated from Russian).

He feels his precarious life situation is aggravated by the precarious labor conditions that gig work offers. He is supposed to work for Bolt as an independent contractor with a low salary, from which he is supposed to pay high taxes. When we ask him what it means to him to be an independent contractor, he answers with resentment towards the Latvian state: "In principle, it does not mean anything to me. The government sucks out from me the last cent I earn here" (N0053, translated from Russian).

He also indicates that he does not like "anything" about this job and feels others look down on him for this job. Among all the other types of gig workers we identify in this study, gig work as a trap type of workers experience is the most precarious.

5.5. Gig Work as Lifestyle

Finally, a small group of our respondents do not even strive for permanent employment; they approach work and life as a series of gigs. On the one hand, we can interpret them as the neoliberal workers par excellence who have entirely accepted the precariousness of life and do not expect to be safeguarded against it. On the other hand, they might also be interpreted as those who have wholly evaded the neoliberal way of life, where the accumulation of economic wealth and the development of a professional career are key measures of individual success.

For them, a gig is almost a lifestyle. Ranging in age from 18 to 35 and coming from different social strata, they embrace the precariousness of life and shift from one temporary position to the next. For them, working for a food delivery platform is just one gig among many. Overall, they see many opportunities in the social structure and labor market. Their engagement with gig work is temporary because their primary purpose is to explore and move on. They tend to develop a neutral or positive affective disposition towards this job.

For example, 20-year-old Krisjanis, an orphan raised by his grandmother, lives from a series of temporary non-platform gigs. He has always felt financial strain and, for some time, has been homeless. For the past year, he has worked as a mascot of a local hospital, carried out in-store food tasting, been an extra in movie crowd scenes, done some acting and writing gigs in advertising, volunteered or worked for a small fee at various festivals, and participated in a live-streamed Nutella eating contest organized by a betting platform. His most permanent source of income is his blog, where he occasionally asks people to donate money. Krisjanis tried food delivery for half a year before moving on to other gigs.

This type of gig worker includes many artistically or creatively inclined people: artists, bloggers, and musicians. Even though they engage in gig work to earn subsistence, exploring this novel form of work is as vital as making money. In contrast with those who approach gig work as a job, these workers are much less pragmatically oriented in their explorations—less interested in cracking the algorithm to make it work for their benefit and more eager to experience life from a novel perspective. For example, when asked about the positive aspects of working for Bolt, a 34-year-old upcoming product designer praised the possibility of meeting local celebrities or entering spaces typically inaccessible for common people, such as hallways of fancy apartment buildings. Another interviewee, a 35-year-old performance artist, talked about the possibility of using WhatsApp chats among couriers as material for his performances.

Because they are not looking for long-term affiliations, this type highly values that you can easily enter and exit the pool of gig workers and that the work does not require any identification. An 18-year-old student of a prestigious high school who comes from a wealthy family and is very engaged in music production says:

> You can decide not to come in for a month if you want to. And then you can simply go online and start working as if nothing has happened. I love it. I love to have this very free schedule. I have more time to do what I really want to do, and I don't have to follow any directions. (N0017)

These gig workers do not rationalize life and labor in precarious terms but in terms of opportunities. Precariousness is instead seen as a normal part of their lifestyle.

6. Conclusions

Other studies on gig work demonstrate the heterogeneity of precarity across different types of platforms, such as food delivery, ride-hailing, global freelance, hospitality, and others (Dunn, 2020; Ravenelle, 2019; Schor et al., 2020). In contrast, we show that the experience of precarity varies even among gig workers of the same type of platform. Our study demonstrates that even if food delivery couriers face the same precarious labor conditions, their subjective experience of precarity varies. Some are trapped in gig work due to the political and economic conditions of post-Soviet neoliberalism. Others have found in this job an escape from neoliberal conditions prevalent at previous workplaces where ever-increasing optimization of time and efficiency alienate people from one another and the self. Still, for others, gig work helps navigate their precarious life by providing a temporary way to earn a living in-between other engagements.

We find that gig workers of a "job" type view this job positively. This finding contrasts with Schor et al. (2020), who find that satisfaction with gig work varies along with the dependency on income from the platform—those who are more dependent tend to feel less satisfied (Schor et al., 2020, p. 841) and argue that the platform dependency "undermines the flexibility and autonomy" (Schor et al., 2020, p. 851). As we demonstrate above with our "job" type, there are couriers who work full-time and are fully satisfied with this job. We find that their satisfaction with gig work is related to the fact that overall, they perceive their opportunities in the labor market as relatively wide and choose gig work because, in the context of their prior working experience, it provides greater autonomy and freedom, including the ability to combine work with hobbies, family, and various caregiving duties. Gig work as highly flexible employment is more compatible with gig workers' various care responsibilities. This finding also resonates with other precarity studies exploring the link between precarious employment and care responsibilities (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020; Millar, 2014).

Other scholars find that algorithmic management results in alienation and loneliness. Glavin et al. (2021), looking at platforms in Canada, argues that algorithmic control creates "ideal work conditions for fostering a sense of personal estrangement and isolation, as captured by perceptions of powerlessness and loneliness" (Glavin et al., 2021, p. 400). The contrast between gig workers in Canada and Latvia may come from differences in overall living conditions in both countries. Precarity and social insecurity of traditional employment in Latvia make gig work labor conditions more appealing and preferable. Instead of the sense of alienation and loneliness, gig workers of "job," "in-between," and "lifestyle" types showed a better work–life and work–family balance and had a healthier sense of self. This finding resonates with the precarity studies that emphasize that there is no "firm division between life and work identities" and, therefore, we should look at precarity through "an understanding of a life-work continuum" and not "competition but on love, care, and solidarity" (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020, pp. 254, 271).

In contrast with other studies of gig workers that focus on immigrant labor (Altenried, 2021; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2022) and argue that platforms are particularly appealing to undocumented immigrants, we find that, in the case of Riga, at least half of all gig workers are locals and immigrants are documented, specifically, international students. There is a possibility that there are undocumented immigrants among gig workers in Riga that we failed to recruit, but it is unlikely that they are predominant in the local gig worker population. The predominance of locals on both platforms can be explained by the relatively recent arrival of platforms in Latvia. Altenried (2021) suggests that platforms use the same strategy while entering new

markets: They first offer somewhat competitive pay and attract locals to gain a market share. However, they then gradually worsen working conditions and lower remuneration. As a consequence, locals or "the first generation riders" exit the gig economy and are replaced by "the second generation, legal immigrants" and later by "the third," undocumented immigrants whose opportunities are even more limited (Altenried, 2021, pp. 9–10). Many of our "job" type respondents, who had worked for Wolt or Bolt since they entered the Latvian market, mentioned how the pay and working conditions had significantly worsened over the past year. The differences between gig workers in Riga and Madrid or Berlin, at least to some extent, might be a consequence of the differing stages of control the platforms are able to exercise over each market.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Unregulated Flexibility and the Multiplication of Labour: Work in the Chinese Platform Economy

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Abstract

The global labour market is witnessing an increase in non-standard employment, and China is no exception, albeit with distinct socio-political dynamics. This research explores the variation of employment relations in China's platform economy and discusses how the various types of precarious employment are generated and developed in post-socialist China. Based on interviews with platform company managers and platform food delivery workers in China, this study draws a broader picture of platform work, considering the complex layers of labour practices at the level of platform companies and platform work. The research discusses the various labour arrangements in the ZZ food delivery platform and finds that variation serves to intensify and diversify managerial practices in platform work; at the same time, traditional types of work in platform companies are also undergoing transitions and the boundary between internal and external organisations is increasingly blurred and fluid. Labour relations in the platform economy are characterised by multiplication, and this multiplication is facilitated by the post-socialist Chinese labour market's general trend towards precariousness and the state's tolerant approach to various non-standard employment types in the era of "the new normal."

Keywords

China; labour relations; multiplication of labour; platform economy; platform work; precarious work

1. Introduction

The global labour market is witnessing an increase in non-standard employment, such as part-time work, temporary work, self-employment, agency work, and platform work. These trends mark a shift towards

precariousness in employment relations (International Labour Organization, 2016; Kalleberg, 2009; Taylor et al., 2017). The mounting precarious employment is a consequence of neo-liberalism policies that advocated higher flexibility over the past three decades in Western countries. Scholars identified four structural forces driving the expansion of precarious employment: de-unionisation, financialisation, globalisation, and the digital revolution-led reconstruction of organisational and labour arrangements (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). In China, the prevalence of precarious employment mirrors global trends, albeit with distinct socio-political dynamics. China has undergone transitions from permanent employment under a socialist planned economy to a contract-based system within a market economy (Gallagher, 2004; Kuruvilla et al., 2011), spurred by post-socialist national policies and the pressures of competitive global capitalism (Kuruvilla et al., 2011). The rise of the platform economy and platform work marks a significant transition in labour relations towards precariousness both in China and globally.

This research explores the variation of employment relations in the Chinese platform economy and discusses how different types of precarious employment are generated by China's historical path and new political economy. Past research has illustrated the precarious features and distinct characteristics of platform work in China, but the variation of employment relations in the platform economy has received inadequate attention. This article fills a gap by reporting on interviews with 34 platform companies and 21 couriers. The research discusses the various labour arrangements for food delivery couriers and finds that the variation serves to intensify the workload among internal migrant workers undertaking platform work. It also finds that traditional types of work in platform companies also undergo transitions and the boundary between internal and external organisations is blurred and fluid. The theoretical lens of "multiplication of labour" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) is used to explain the Chinese case in this study. It adds to Altenried's (2021) research by showing that the multiplication of labour for migrant workers is not only through automatic and algorithmic management but also through sophisticated contract design and a variety of labour arrangements. Additionally, this research argues that labour is multiplied in the post-socialist Chinese labour market, which is characterised by a prevailing precariousness. The state's tolerant approach towards various non-standard employment types in the current "new normal" (*xin chang tai*) climate promotes this trend.

This research contributes to three debates. First, it adds to the research on precarious work in post-socialist countries, where the role of the state, market-oriented reforms, and historical social control play essential roles. Second, this article engages with Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) concept of "multiplication of labour" to explain the complicated layers of platform economy employment, adding to Altenried's (2021) research on the multiplication of labour and international migrant platform workers. Third, it empirically examines employment relations in the Chinese internet-related platform economy, situating the discussion of platform-based work within a broader political economy context.

2. Mapping and Explaining Precarious Work in the Global Platform Economy

A growing body of literature explores the prevalence of precarious platform work around the world. One approach focuses on the platform's power and control over workers, explaining workers' precariousness as a consequence of asymmetric power relations between the platform and workers. Studies of algorithmic control find that platforms exercise hard and soft control over workers through the labour process (Kellogg et al., 2020;

Newlands, 2021; H. A. Rahman, 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Furthermore, scholars argue that platforms exercise a dominant power over users and their ecosystem (Culpepper & Thelen, 2020; Cutolo & Kenney, 2021; Kenney et al., 2021; Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018). Another approach sees precarity in the platform economy as part of the rise of precarious employment in the labour market since the 1970s (Schor et al., 2020). Platform work is seen as another form of global non-standard precarious employment, along with existing part-time, temporary, and self-employment arrangements developed under neoliberal policies (International Labour Organization, 2016; Kalleberg, 2009; K. S. Rahman & Thelen, 2019; Ravenelle, 2019; Taylor et al., 2017).

Despite the strengths of these two approaches, they often view platforms and platform workers as homogenised, overlooking their diversity. This study reveals that two additional approaches, which delve into individual and institutional variations within platform work, prove particularly insightful in explaining the dynamics of the Chinese context. The third approach examines the exploitation of disadvantaged workers in the labour market by platforms. The diversification of platforms results in good and bad gig jobs, with skilled freelancers having more autonomy, while unskilled piece-rate workers face more precariousness (Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Kalleberg, 2016; Spreitzer et al., 2017; Sutherland et al., 2020). Schor et al. (2020) argue that workers who are dependent on platform income are more precarious than those earning additional income elsewhere. Moreover, academics highlight that migrant workers constitute the primary platform workforce, and their vulnerability in work is intricately tied to their precarious migrant status (Altenried, 2021; Das & Srravya, 2021; van Doorn et al., 2023).

A fourth approach explains the variation in platform work through an institutional-regulatory lens. Comparative studies suggest that platforms adopt varying employment arrangements in different national regimes (Koutsimpogiorgos et al., 2023). It is argued that self-employment is most prevalent in lightly regulated countries such as the US, while continental regimes in Europe adopt a greater variety of contract types as secondary forms of employment (Ametowobla & Kirchner, 2023). The diversity of platform strategies and practices in various contexts is influenced by the contested interplay among market, state, and civil society, and this diversity is connected to platforms' capability to adjust to domestic institutions, encompassing the markets of capital and labour, as well as the education and social safety systems (Davis & Sinha, 2021; Schüßler et al., 2021).

The third and fourth approaches, which explain the diversity of platform work, can situate Chinese platform economies in global platform capitalism. Yet, due to the post-socialist context and the unique dynamics of internal migrant workers, the Chinese platform economy does not simply adopt North American and European models. Research on platform work in China has largely focused on the precariousness of internal migrant workers in the platform economy. The mainstream approach remains the first approach of algorithmic management and control over workers in the labour process, and they are less associated with the broader transition in the labour market (L. Chen, 2020, 2022; J. Y. Chen & Sun, 2020; Sun, 2019; Sun & Chen, 2021; Sun et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2019; L. Zhao, 2022; L. H. Zhao & Yu, 2021). A few studies have situated labour concerns within broader socio-economic and organisational contexts (Lin, 2022; Lüthje, 2019; E. J. Zhao, 2019; L. H. Zhao & Yu, 2021). Despite the rich case studies in the Chinese context, comprehensive accounts of the diversity of platform work and its relation to the historical development of the labour market and the vulnerability of workers are less explored. This research aims to fill this gap and add the perspective of the "multiplication of labour" to the discussion of platform work in China.

3. Changing Employment Relationship in Post-Socialist China

Employment relationships in China have dramatically transformed from a socialist system characterised by permanent employment and comprehensive social benefits to a contract-based system (Gallagher, 2004; Kuruvilla et al., 2011) following the Open and Reform policy (*gai ge kai fang*) in 1978. The state and the *hukou* system (household registration system) have played essential roles in this transition and the creation of an unequal labour market in post-socialist China. Pre-reform socialist China was a society with institutional segmentation in essential aspects of life, one of the most influential of which was the *hukou* system established in the 1950s. The *hukou* system divides Chinese citizens into two classes: Urban *hukou* holders are entitled to urban citizenship and state-provided social welfare, while rural *hukou* holders are entitled to rural citizenship, with welfare reliant on families and rural collectives (Cheng & Selden, 1994; Z. Liu, 2005). Socialist *Danwei* (work units) were the central economic and social units in urban areas. They offered permanent employment and guaranteed social benefits from cradle to grave for urban citizens (Fan, 2002). By contrast, rural citizens were bonded to agriculture and excluded from the industrial labour market and state-funded social welfare.

The reforms abolished *Danwei* employment and weakened institutional segmentation to establish a market economy. The labour market transition towards flexible accumulation and precarious employment continued when China opened its market to global competitors in preparation for joining the World Trade Organisation in the 1990s. Contract-based employment allows employers to hire and fire workers according to their demands, creating vast work opportunities for rural residents, while many urban workers were laid off from permanent employment. However, the persistent *hukou* system functions as an "institutional-based opportunity structure" (Fan, 2002, p. 103) and has significantly influenced job opportunity distributions. The rural-urban *hukou* division has created not only direct institutional discrimination that excluded rural-to-urban migrant workers from privileged state-owned enterprises but also more subtle accumulated disadvantage for internal migrant workers in the competitive labour market, including those in educational attainment and social capitals (Huang et al., 2010).

The marginalisation of internal migrant workers (*nong min gong*) in the marketised labour market is fuelled by post-socialist policies that have transformed labour legislation and welfare systems into individualised and fragmented systems. The Labour Law of 1995 requires employers to establish formal labour contracts with their workers. However, the law lacked detail on enforcement, resulting in its failure to be implemented (Cooney, 2007). The new Labour Contract Law of 2008 has improved enforcement, but implementation remains imbalanced among corporations with varying ownership and scales. As state-owned sectors and large enterprises followed labour legislation, internal migrant workers in the private and informal sectors were exploited without cost (Cooney, 2007; Friedman & Lee, 2010), resulting in an even more segmented and fragmented labour market. Furthermore, new government-operated social insurance schemes that provide social benefits for workers in the marketised labour market have similar implementation issues. Internal migrant workers remain among the least covered groups after decades of social insurance coverage expansion. In 2017, the Employee Health Insurance and Pension coverage rate for internal migrant workers was only 22% (Zhang, 2019). At the same time, enterprises in China have developed various non-standard employment types, which have been applied to internal migrant workers, such as dispatched workers (*pai qian gong*), outsourced workers (*wai bao gong*), and short-term contract workers, pushing the labour market towards flexibility and precariousness (Friedman & Lee, 2010).

This review focuses on how the rural-urban *hukou* citizenship division has transformed into labour market inequality in China. While there is a rich body of literature on the prevalence of precarious employment and the vulnerability of internal migrant workers in China, there is a gap in perspectives on how industry practices of precarious employment are embedded in the post-socialist unequal labour market. The emergence of an internet-driven platform economy marks a further transition towards precarious employment, providing opportunities for scholarly research on industry practices as a case to examine labour relations in precariousness.

4. Researching the Chinese Platform Economy: Multiplication of Labour

"The multiplication of labour" describes tendencies in how labour is intensified, diversified, and heterogenised in contemporary capitalist society (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). It points to the frontiers of capital that explore various economic, political, geopolitical, and cultural borders, which play a productive role in the multiplication of labour (Mao, 2021). The multiplication of the labour lens offers a perspective to capture the ongoing trends in the global labour market, with the increasing blurring of work and non-work, along with the increasing flexibility and fragmentation of work arrangements (Altenried, 2023; Neilson, 2009).

The multiplication of labour perspective is applied in explaining key dynamics in platform work. On the one hand, platforms utilise digital standardisation and algorithmic management to automate work distribution, effectively including and excluding different workers from the labour process, including unskilled migrant workers with language barriers. These arrangements blur the boundaries between work–life and production–reproduction, intensifying workers' time arrangements and incorporating former non-workers into the workforce (Altenried, 2021, 2023). On the other hand, international migrant workers, who experience multiple dimensions of vulnerability and exclusion in the local labour market, find platform work to be inclusive due to platforms' ability to work with a highly diverse and heterogeneous group of unskilled workers (Altenried, 2021).

This research argues that Chinese platform work is an example of the multiplication of labour in the post-socialist platform economy. Most Chinese platform workers, predominantly internal migrants relocating from rural to urban areas, encounter fewer constraints, such as undocumented status and language barriers, compared to international migrants in Altenried's (2021) European cases. However, Chinese internal migrant workers remain an appropriate workforce for the platforms' algorithmic management, contributing to the further multiplication of labour in the sector.

Internal migrant workers in China differ from non-migrant workers undertaking platform work in three key ways under the influence of the *hukou* system. First, internal migrant workers, being non-citizens of destination cities, face restrictions in accessing local educational resources for children, causing family separation, especially those with left-behind children (Ye & Pan, 2011). This family arrangement creates a large number of workers who delegate care work to rural family members and relocate to cities, ready for intensified work, while the platforms' piece-rate system not only permits but also incentivises workers to extend their working hours and workload (Sun et al., 2023). Second, internal migrant workers are significantly less covered by employee social insurance, including healthcare, pension, unemployment, occupational injury, maternity insurance, and housing funds (Zhang, 2019). Migrant workers, due to their precarious circumstances, frequently prioritise immediate and temporary rewards in their work. Platform

work is a source of immediate cash flow for these workers. The flexibility of working overtime and the algorithmic distribution of orders allows workers to maximise their immediate cash earnings (Zhen et al., 2020). Third, internal migrant workers, often lacking skills and with limited education, are excluded from formal and secure jobs in the labour market. Traditionally, their choices are limited to factory assembly lines and low-end service jobs, both characterised by precarity and insecurity (National Health and Family Planning Commission, 2018). New platform jobs provide an alternative with comparable levels of precarity but offer more autonomy and flexibility under algorithmic management, attracting workers to transition from factories to platforms.

This research will further explore the combination of internal migrant workers and platform work in post-socialist China. It examines the intensification and diversification of managerial practices in both platform companies and platform work, adding another layer of analysis to the multiplication of labour: The multiplication of labour in the platform economy is not only through the incorporation of migrant workers into algorithmic and automatic management but also through complicated designs of labour arrangements. As discussed in Section 6, the perspective of "multiplication of labour" explains the increasing complexity and differentiation in the platform economy and allows for political economy explanations. This article explores how the multiplication of labour is practised in the platform economy and how the political economy in China facilitates or impedes these practices.

5. Research Methods

In the Chinese context, the government uses "the new economy" (*xin jing ji*) to cover a wide range of activities in the platform economy when making policies and reporting statistics. The new economy includes all types of online and offline gig platforms, social media platforms, and other internet technology-orientated companies (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). This research employs the widely accepted term "platform economy," which refers to *xin jing ji* in the Chinese context as defined by the government. This research is based on fieldwork conducted in Guangdong province, which is a hub for labour relations studies and has an active and robust platform economy.

There are two parts to employment relations in the platform economy: employment within platform companies and platform work. While many researchers have treated them separately, we consider that a comprehensive understanding of employment relations requires information from both parts. The first part of the fieldwork was carried out in 2018 and 2019 and consisted of interviews with representatives from 34 platform companies located in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Foshan, Dongguan, Zhuhai, and Zhongshan. These companies were identified alphabetically from B to Z and then from AA to AE. These interviews aimed to gain insight into the general labour practices of platform companies in Guangdong province in the context of current labour legislation. The focus was on the degree of management flexibility and the labour relationships between companies within the platform ecosystem. The companies interviewed provided a range of services, such as transportation, delivery, information, and real estate services. They ranged in size from platform headquarters with over 1,000 employees to platform subcontractors with about 100 to 500 employees and city offices with fewer than 10 employees. The majority of interviewees held positions in human resources departments. The interview covered topics such as the company's general employment situation, human resource strategies and challenges, and the potential risks associated with regulatory policies.

The researchers chose the ZZ platform for the second part of the study because it represents a typical case for understanding labour arrangements in platform work. Fieldwork was conducted in 2019 to investigate workers' experiences on the ZZ platform, which is a leading food delivery platform with millions of workers. The study observed six locations in three cities (Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Foshan) to represent diversities in city scale, central and marginal business areas, and labour organisational patterns. Additionally, 21 couriers were interviewed.

6. Findings

This research examines two sets of labour practices in the platform economy: The platform workers who deliver services for the platforms and the staff who work in the platform companies. These workplaces exhibit differences in terms of precariousness. Platform workers face precarity under new management forms, especially with a significant labour force consisting of unskilled internal migrant workers, and lack the applicable labour protection guaranteed by Chinese labour laws. Conversely, employment in platform companies primarily involves skilled and educated workers, entailing a more traditional type of employment subject to labour protection, which refers to a set of labour rights based on employment contracts and five social insurances: pension, healthcare, occupational injury, unemployment, and maternity insurances. Nevertheless, they share similarities in two key aspects: The work in platform companies also undergoes a significant transition to flexible and precarious employment and both exhibit multiple designs of labour arrangement, leading to the intensification and multiplication of labour.

6.1. Multiple Design of Platform Workers: The Case of the ZZ Platform

Our discussion starts with the platform work. Similar to European counterparts (Ametowobla & Kirchner, 2023), Chinese food delivery platforms also feature diverse employment types, however varying in regulatory context and managerial strategies. In continental European regimes, counterpart platforms use a mix of employment relationships, including self-employment, employee-type contracts, and subcontracting, as an adaptation to state regulations that protect workers' labour rights. However, the development of Chinese platform work has been in the opposite direction. The original form was direct employment contracts between workers and platforms (or subsidiary companies). However, this form of contract disappeared in 2018 and was replaced by subcontractor relationships (premium delivery, see type 2) and self-employment contracts (crowdsourcing delivery and loyal crowdsourcing delivery, see types 1 and 3; Beijing Zhicheng Migrant Workers Legal Aid and Research Centre, 2021). There are no significant differences between self-employment and subcontracting in terms of social protection from the workers' perspective. Neither type of contract provides protection and social benefits, suggesting a different dynamic in the use of different labour arrangements in China.

Founded in the early 2010s, the ZZ platform is a leading food delivery platform that employs over a million couriers. The majority of the platform work pyramid consists of unskilled rural migrant labour: 77% of the total platform couriers for the ZZ platform were rural migrant labourers at the time of this study. Delivery workers are divided into three types of work arrangements, but workers are similarly precarious. Although all couriers register through the company's app and work via the app, the internal organisation of labour and management of the ZZ platform is a multi-layered system. The three types of work arrangement are:

1. Crowdsourcing delivery (*zhong bao*): Workers register on the platform and receive orders independently without establishing formal labour relations with the platform. Workers can decide their working time and workload, but they are still subject to the platform's algorithmic management.
2. Premium delivery (*zhuan song*): Full-time workers who must go online during pre-arranged work periods and receive mandatory orders. The working hours are usually at least 48 hours a week, more than the labour law stipulated 40 hours a week. Under this pattern, the platform outsources orders in a specific area to contractors who operate management stations (*zhandian*) that directly recruit and manage couriers in a full-time manner.
3. Loyal crowdsourcing delivery (*zhong cheng*): Workers have to finish a stipulated large number of orders with higher service standards but still build on crowdsourcing relationships. Their working hours and workload are similar to those of full-time premium couriers. Loyal crowdsourcing is the initial name of this type of platform workers and this paper still uses it because it captures a crucial feature of the type.

All three options involve complex labour relations by introducing third-party agencies, such as subcontractors that operate delivery management stations, human resources agencies that provide labour dispatching services, and financial services agencies that handle workers' salaries. For crowdsourcing and loyal crowdsourcing delivery, couriers are required to agree on a service contract with a third-party labour provider when registering on the platform (Figure 1). It is important to note that this is not an employment contract. Premium delivery may involve a few subcontracted management stations that sign labour contracts directly with workers, but many rely on additional third-party labour service agencies (Figure 2).

The practices of precariousness are carried out through two strategies. Firstly, the introduction of various third-party agencies to complicate labour relations, which, in the cases of loyal crowdsourcing and some premium delivery, constitutes disguised employment; as courier Li (pseudonym) said:

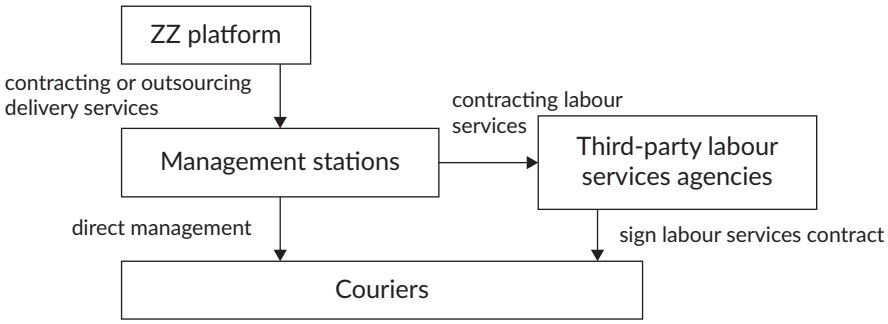

Figure 1. Employment relations of premium delivery.

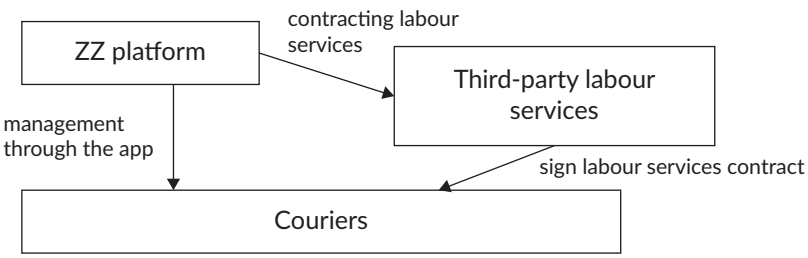

Figure 2. Employment relations of crowdsourcing and loyal crowdsourcing delivery.

> I am not sure about the labour relationship. I previously worked in crowdsourcing delivery, and I could say I was a freelancer. But I work as a loyal crowdsourcing delivery now, and it requires me to be online at least 8 hours a day and 6 days a week. It even requires us to attend morning meetings. The management is all about full-time work.

Secondly, the evident gaps in employment protection and enforcement and direct violation of labour laws. Of the 21 respondents, 6 signed labour contracts with subcontractors, but none received social insurance from employers. Of these, two workers were covered by the Employee Social Insurance system but had to pay the full cost themselves, including the part that employers are legally obliged to pay. Some workers had negotiated with employers but failed, as courier Mei (pseudonym) said: "I asked before, but they refused and said that all the money was given to me….The government doesn't care."

There are no significant differences between migrant and non-migrant workers in terms of the precariousness of employment contracts and social security; however, the work of internal migrant workers is intensified and multiplied, especially through premium delivery and loyal crowdsourcing. Premium delivery and loyal crowdsourcing require mandatory working hours and stricter management than crowdsourcing. For example, one customer complaint can result in a fine of less than 10 yuan for crowdsourcing workers, and the fine is around 50–200 yuan for premium delivery and loyal crowdsourcing workers.

So why do some workers choose the latter two, even though they are no better in terms of labour protection? This is because premium delivery and loyal crowdsourcing provide adequate orders, and crowdsourcing entails fewer orders distributed by algorithms, a strategy that pushes some workers to choose the former two. Adequate orders reduce the waiting time, which intensifies the workload, and workers can work as long as they want—extending working hours to the physical limits of the worker. As a result, workers can earn a higher monthly income. These two types meet the needs of internal migrant workers in particular. As discussed in Section 4, many internal migrant workers are separated from their families and are willing to work harder and longer due to their precarious social security situation pushing them to seek higher and immediate income. Although there is diversity among internal migrant workers, and workers who are family breadwinners tend to opt for premium delivery and loyal crowdsourcing, non-migrant workers are still distinct in the sector. Interviewees Tian and Hu (pseudonyms), the two non-migrant workers out of 21 interviewees, reported a different work–life balance compared to migrant workers. Both of them worked for crowdsourcing delivery, although Hu is the breadwinner in the family. Tian sometimes takes Cantonese morning tea in restaurants with family or friends before starting work at around 10 am, and Hu plays mahjong (a traditional Chinese four-player tile-based game) at weekends. The keywords in their narratives—weekend, family, and regular leisure activities—are rare in the stories of migrant workers.

6.2. Employment Structure of Platform Companies: A Four-Layer Design

Precarious employment is not only experienced by internal migrant workers in platform work; non-migrants in the traditional type of employment have also been experiencing flexibilisation and multiplication of labour. The labour force in the platform companies is mainly educated and skilled workers, with a small portion of internal migrant workers doing unskilled work. The Chinese *hukou* system transforms rural into urban *hukou* when students enter universities. Therefore, educated workers mainly have urban *hukou*, although they may

initially be from rural villages. Our research finds that platform companies have widely used flexible employment as an important cost-saving strategy. According to the 34 interviews with platform representatives, we summarise the flexible employment structure as a four-layer design, namely: (a) full-time and well-paid employment for core functions; (b) outsourcing employment for supportive functions such as administration and customer services; (c) dispatched employment for cleaning and facility maintenance; and (d) diversified partnership for labour management and services delivery.

6.2.1. Direct Employment for Core Functions

Our research finds that there are three distinct core functions in firms for which human resource managers reserve a considerable budget: (a) internet technology, which guarantees the internet infrastructure and advances the innovation of firms; (b) operations that design competitive services or goods for customers and deliver them efficiently; and (c) management, which supports the company as a whole. Not surprisingly, most firms provide full-time jobs with relatively generous benefits for these core positions. For instance, S company, which runs live broadcasting platforms, reserved 70% of their total of approximately 4,000 positions for internet technology-related programmers and engineers. Firms recruit core workers from elite universities, both locally and abroad, and offer them payment above average. The representative of S company was proud of its highly rewarded incentive mechanism: The company offers those who achieve the goals of innovative projects up to 20 times their monthly income as a reward. Platform companies try to create a satisfying environment to retain core workers, but simultaneously, the work is highly intensive and competitive. Forced ranking systems are widely used. AC platform organised employees into groups and evaluated their input and output at every stage. While workers in groups that made profits received enviable awards, workers in less profitable groups could be forced out of groups and companies.

6.2.2. Outsourcing and Dispatched Employment for Skilled and Non-Skilled Supportive Work

The employment relations of ancillary positions in platform companies are complex; indeed, they cannot simply be summarised as peripheral. For supplementary functions, such as parts of HR management and administration, sales and marketing, and call centres, platform companies rely on outsourcing. The practices of firms vary according to the different value contributions defined by the employer. However, this mainly relates to skilled work that requires a certain level of education and skills. If platform companies hire them directly, the labour cost is high because of the high-level salaries and benefits. In outsourcing employment, contractors, usually small-to-medium size companies, build up formal labour relationships with skilled workers with proper labour contracts and social insurance, but at a lower level. Firms still exercise significant control over the daily practices of workers. The ZZ platform outsourced management of regional service to AB company, and the workers employed in AB company call ZZ platform their “headquarters,” although they know ZZ platform or its subsidiary does not employ them. Outsourced workers in AB company report to “headquarters” weekly and communicate with representatives of ZZ platform for detailed checks regarding promotional items and activities and so on.

Another layer of employment in firms is of unskilled workers, such as cleaners, security guards, and facility maintenance staff. Unskilled internal migrant workers mainly take on these kinds of work. Workers in this type of employment usually build up relationships with third-party labour services agencies, and workers may sign labour contracts and enjoy the lowest level of social insurance. However, contracts could be terminated quickly

without compensation. In other cases, workers have no labour contract with either platform companies or third-party agencies. Introducing third-party agencies lowers the cost of labour and avoids legal responsibility. E platform, a ride-hailing platform, uses dispatched workers for canteen, cleaning, and security services, as does T platform, an information services platform. At AC company, dispatched workers account for some 3,000 workers from a total workforce of 8,000 employees, primarily for "basic and replaceable tasks, such as facility maintenance and testing" (interview with HR in AC company). The AC company provides a channel for the best-performing dispatched workers (around 10%) to become formal employees. Others, however, remain on dispatched status, even if they stay with the company for a few years: "They work really hard because they have the opportunity for promotion" (interview with HR in AC company).

6.2.3. The Partnership of Labour Management for Services Delivery

The partnership of labour management for services delivery is the fourth layer of employment in the platform economy. The platform-dependent partners include, but are not limited to, suppliers of goods or services and labour-management agencies. Platforms and firms are highly co-dependent as one cannot function without the other (Kenney & Zysman, 2020)—for instance, the ride-hailing E platform partnered with a few car-rental companies in Dongguan. The drivers working for the E platform rent cars from a car rental, and the rental company helps the drivers get proper licenses for the ride-hailing platforms. An interview with Dongguan B car rental company shows a close relationship between the E platform and the car rental companies:

> Staff in E platform would ask us to come to their office regularly. The government requires E platforms to follow the new regulations on (getting a special) driver's license and car license (for ride-hailing services), and we are responsible for the driver's license.

In summary, we identify four employment types deployed by platforms and elaborate on the considerations of platform companies behind the arrangements. It is noted that the actual practices may be more complicated and less clear-cut. Some companies tend to deny the dispatched and outsourcing arrangements and prefer to call all "partners" regardless of the legal relations. Furthermore, the layer four "partnership" could be diverse, ranging from various service delivery institutions to independent individuals. However, little information is available on how platform workers are organised because HR departments generally do not consider platform workers as part of a company's workforce.

Employment practices in platform companies indicate changes in the traditional workforce in this sector. Migrant and non-migrant divisions still play a role in differentiating various levels of contracts and social benefits, but the variety is more complex. The organisational boundary between internal and external is blurred (Connelly et al., 2021). In this study, some internal functions of organisations, which entail skilled and non-skilled supportive work, are outsourced or dispatched to reduce labour costs. The platform companies heterogenise based on elite educational backgrounds and internet and technology skills, differentiating some workers from others as more privileged. However, the core-supportive distinction is also fluidly defined by the employer. Even the core function and internet skills do not guarantee preferential jobs in many cases. Platforms also outsource some programming tasks to other smaller companies. Labour is multiplied through the complex work design, which diversifies and heterogenises workforces into sub-groups with different functions and characteristics.

6.3. Discussion: The Political Economy That Proliferates the "Multiplication of Labour"

The multiple types of labour arrangements at the platform work level are used to intensify working hours and workloads in heterogeneous groups of workers at low or no cost, while the multiple layers of labour relations at the level of platform companies are introduced for some internal functions for less privileged groups, differentiated by skills, educational backgrounds, migrant status, and so on. *Hukou* is a differentiation tool in the labour market that multiplies labour, although platform companies and labour laws do not directly discriminate against internal migrant workers. Employers and platforms exploit the inequality and gaps in both the labour market and policy implementation, piloting and applying the most radical flexibilisation methods to the most disadvantaged in the labour market. Moreover, the general labour market trend towards precariousness and flexibility provides ample opportunities for flexible platform work modes. The use of dispatched workers is one example. Not only do the HR managers of platform companies use dispatched workers as cleaners and security guards, but the management stations of the ZZ platform also use them to complicate the employment relations with delivery workers.

The state has a significant role in allowing fragmented and precarious labour relations practices with sophisticated multiple layers. The Chinese government has encouraged the internet industry and platform economy to boost growth during the economic downturn. Developing the internet-related economy has been a national strategy since President Xi Jinping's speech at the World Internet Conference in Wuzhen in 2015, directing China to become a global internet powerhouse (Jinping, 2015; H. Y. Liu, 2023). The industry practices of informatisation and precariousness have been bolstered by China's priority to drive economic growth. Under this direction, labour protection can be of secondary importance, especially during periods of economic hardship (Lin, 2022). While supporting the platform economy through policies and budgets, the state has taken a laissez-faire attitude to regulating platform work. Easy-accessed platform jobs and other flexible but precarious jobs are considered buffers to rising unemployment. Premier Li Keqiang summarised that the attitude to take is to stay open to newly emerging things, and regulatory rules should be "tolerant" (*bao rong*) and "cautious" (*shen shen*; Li, 2018). Therefore, jobs in the platform economy are being created in the era of "new normal" labour relations in which labour standards are lowered and protections are further loosened. Governments freeze the minimum wage standard, intervene in labour protests through police action, and crack down on labour NGOs and activists to maintain a stable society and a business-friendly environment (Chan, 2020). Without much intervention from the central and local state, new types of platform-dependent work are generated, and various non-standard employment patterns are further developed. It is noted that there is a shift in attitude towards regulating platform work in 2021; however, as it is later than our field research, we will not elaborate on it in detail.

In summary, the complexity of employment relations in the Chinese platform economy can be understood through the lens of the multiplication of labour. Compared to Altenried's (2021) study on international migrant workers in the platform economy, Chinese internal migrant workers are influenced by *Hukou* and the post-socialist rural-urban dynamics in China, while platforms have adopted multiple types of labour arrangements to intensify working hours and workload. Furthermore, managerial practices in platform companies witness similar trends of multiplication. Labour practices have become more diverse and complicated, with blurred boundaries between employer–employee and internal–external relationships. The multiple layers of work are diversified by matching workers with various characteristics, while education, skills, and migrant status are applied as differentiation tools. Furthermore, the multiplication of labour in the

Chinese platform economy is better understood in the context of the Chinese state, which prioritises economic growth over workers' protection during times of economic hardship.

7. Conclusion: Impact of the Multiplication of Labour in the Chinese Platform Economy

In summary, this research adds to the "multiplication of labour" lens in the platform economy by investigating the experiences of Chinese internal migrants and the managerial practices in platform companies. The multiplication of work is not only through the algorithmic management of platforms to nudge migrant workers but also through the multiple designs of work arrangements to intensify workers' working hours and workloads. Furthermore, the multi-layered structures of employment suggest the consistency of platform work and other forms of precarious employment in the platform economy. The "multiplication of labour" lens provides a useful and critical perspective to address workers' experiences, industrial practices, and the wider political context.

Ultimately, it is essential to ask what implications are present with the multiplication of labour in the platform economy. The practices of multiple layers of flexible employment in the platform economy could push the Chinese labour market further towards precariousness. The platform economy is one of the leading sectors in the country and its labour practices will most likely serve as a pathway for other industries. It is not surprising to see many traditional enterprises rapidly seeking a digital transformation, including reorganising their labour force by using platforms and new internet technologies.

Another question is how the multiplication of labour influences workers. As argued by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, p. 91), it has challenged the hegemony of organised "industrial workers over the entirety of dependent workers" in economically advanced countries. The study of Chinese food delivery workers also demonstrates the eroded solidarity among workers with various labour arrangements (Lei, 2021). In the platform economy, workers are stuck in a labour market that is fragmented, segmented, and multiplied. This situation raises unanswered but crucial questions. For instance, what will be the alternatives for workers who do not want to choose from multiple options, each with the same level of precariousness? How can the agency of workers overcome the high levels of flexibilisation and multiplication in the workplace in a broad sense?

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Precarity of Place in the Global South: The Case of Tea Garden Workers in Assam

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Abstract

Tea plantations in South Asia were notorious for the slavery-like working conditions during the colonial period. Although factors like the colonial state and the closed economy, among others, that have enabled such slavery-like conditions to persist have changed, the "unfree" conditions of work still determine the social reproduction of the tea garden labourers. The unfree conditions of tea garden labour have been the subject of many research projects. However, attempts to examine the tea garden and its labouring people through the lens of precarity are limited. Drawing from in-depth interviews with tea garden workers this article uses the concept of "precarity of place" to examine the experience of precarity of tea garden workers in Assam.

Keywords

Assam; Global South; India; place and space precarity; precarity; tea gardens

1. Introduction

In his statement to the Secretary of the Assam Legislative Assembly, proposing the *Assam Tea Garden Labourers' Freedom of Movement Bill* in November 1937, Omeo Kumar Das, a Gandhian and future Labour Minister in the state of Assam, noted thus:

> It is generally felt that freedom of movement of tea garden labourers is limited in a manner unheard of in any other industry. They are not allowed to go out of the estate whenever they want to do so. It is a

> common practice to engage night chowkidars to keep watch over the lines and prevent labourers from leaving the estate. The impression has been created in the minds of labourers that they have no right to go out of the gardens of their own free will. This constant restraint on their right to free movement has reduced them to a state of slavery. (as cited in Behal, 2006)

The conditions of immobility, surveillance, and dependence still plague the lives of tea garden workers across Assam. According to the Tea Board of India, Assam shares 54.19% of the total land devoted to tea cultivation in India with a contribution of half of the tea production in India (Government of India, 2017). It accounted for 11% of the global production of tea in 2018 (SITA, 2020). The tea gardens in Assam employed 1.03 million workers in 2018 (SITA, 2020). The tea garden workers, their families, and ex-tea garden workers constitute 17.4% of the total population of the state of Assam (Government of India, 2011). The tea garden workers represent the bottom layer of Assamese society, registering the lowest human development indicators for any group in the country. The tea garden workers originally belonged to tribal communities in the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa, and were brought as indentured labourers to work in the tea gardens of Assam during the colonial period.

"Tea tribe" or Adivasis is an umbrella term used by the government and mainstream Assamese society to refer to tea garden workers and ex-tea garden workers who have moved out of the tea gardens. They comprise diverse ethnicities from eastern and central India, united by their association with the tea garden. The dependence of a large share of the population on the tea industry, as well as the long history of the tea industry in Assam over two centuries, makes it an important case to investigate the precarity of the tea garden workers. Drawing on Banki's (2013) concept of "precarity of place" we examine experiences of precarity for the tea garden workers resulting from the intersection of the physical place of the tea gardens, the structure and practices of tea garden management, and the liberal trade reforms. We argue that the colonial continuities reflected in the structure and the practices of surveillance and dependency hinged on the physical place of the tea garden along with a globalised market, state apathy, and indifference of the mainstream society shape the experiences of precarity for the tea garden workers.

2. Literature Review

Standing (2011) reckons the essential condition of precarious existence as a life "without an anchor of stability." According to him, precarity is characterised by the lack of labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security, and representation security. Studies have explored a range of themes connecting work and life under the rubric of precarity. Some of these themes are precarious work and precarious migrant status (Goldring & Landolt, 2011), precarious employment, art and artist collectives (Bain & McLean, 2013), temporary migrant care workers and precariousness (Boese et al., 2013), the impact of precarious work on key life decisions (Chan & Tweedie, 2015), work–family conflict and precariousness (Saritas, 2020), and the place precarity of male manual labourers (Simpson et al., 2021). The notion of precarity and precariat in the West has found expression in the literature as a representation of workers and migrants unsettled by neoliberal conditions, globalisation, and the waning welfare state. In this sense, it represents the workers experiencing insecure employment and the migrant labourers caught in the complexities of VISA regimes. To what extent does the idea of the precariat represent the other forms of labour exploitation and exploited populations such as the tea tribe and tea garden workers?

Tea garden workers are categorised into permanent and temporary workers. In principle, the permanent worker is entitled to employment until retirement age and benefits such as a provident fund, gratuity, housing, medical facilities, education for children, bonuses, and ration under the state statute. However, in practice, ethnicity, history of migration, the colonial origins of the tea industry, the globalised market for tea, state apathy, and indifference of the mainstream society inflict insecurity and vulnerability on the tea garden workers and tea tribes. Despite being in a permanent job contract, the tea garden worker endures the different layers of precarity outlined by Standing (2011).

Lee and Kofman's (2012) observations about precarity outside the United States are particularly pertinent to the case of tea garden workers discussed here. They observe that the national and regional contexts such as colonial history, nature of state, timing, and pace of industrialisation, the advent of neoliberal and structural adjustment policies and the resultant changes in class relationships, labour movements, and the capacity of the state to address the changes shape the experience of precarity. Their observations suggest that the adoption of the concept of the precariat in the Global South calls for attention to these factors. A growing literature on precarity has responded to this call in the context of South and Southeast Asia. Banki (2013) has examined the precarity of Burmese migrants in Thailand. Green and Estes (2018) have examined the precarity of labourers from microfinance-driven debt in rural Cambodia. Natarajan et al. (2019) examine the "climate precarity" of farmers forced into brick kiln work in Cambodia. Hamid and Tutt (2019) have examined the precarity of Tamil migrant construction workers in Singapore. Punathil (2022) has examined the consequences of precarious citizenship for Bengali-speaking Muslim detainees in India. The present article contributes to this literature.

Locating the idea of precarity in the development literature, Natarajan et al. (2019) alert us to an emerging body of work that supports the possibility of nuanced approaches in the application of precarity, particularly in the context of the Global South. According to them the first dimension of this development is the transcendence of the concept of precarity from one exclusively applied to link market and labour conditions to one that incorporates the multiple dimensions of life under late capitalism. The focus of this approach is to look beyond precarity as a condition emerging exclusively from work but as one that emerges from the intersection of various aspects of life. The second dimension of this development is the dispelling of the assumption that post-Fordism marks the temporal origins of precarious work. Munck's (2013) suggestion that precarious work has been a norm for labour in the Global South is important to the analysis of labour in the Global South in general and working conditions such as plantation labour in particular. If precarity has been a general condition of labour in the Global South; if the precarious conditions of work have given the possibility for looking at work under particular conditions in a new light in the Global North, then the scholarship on labour so far has failed to understand work in its totality in the Global South. In this vein, Natarajan et al. (2019) call for further perspectives on precarity from the Global South. They suggest that there is a need for research on precarity from the Global South, which is key to the "dismantling of the very underpinnings of precarity as something that is necessarily worsening or exceptional" (Natarajan et al., 2019, p. 905). We draw on Natarajan and colleagues' notion of precarity as reflecting the conditions generated by trade reforms and the subjective ontological experience of life in the vestigial colonial structure of the tea garden in exploring the precarious life of tea garden workers.

Further expanding the scope of the concept, Banki (2013, p. 450) notes that "precarity suggests the potential for exploitation and abuse, but not its certain presence." Susan Banki introduced the sub-concept of "precarity of place" to account for the precarious conditions of the non-citizen population in the Global South.

She suggests that the usefulness of the concept is in describing "the roots of precarity in global systems and its outcomes in creating differentiated types of sufferers" (p. 452). According to Banki, the precarity of place is the lack of permission for an individual or group to enjoy the benefits and privileges that constitute a place, made possible by "vulnerability to removal or deportation from one's physical location" (p. 453). While Banki's immediate concern here is related to the threat of displacement, the emphasis on the inability to live a life free from control and exploitation made possible by social, economic, and political structures and practices that are determined by spatial aspects that amplify historical, local and global imbalances makes it a potential candidate to capture the experiences of the tea garden workers. We use the idea of place both in its spatial dimension as well as the social relations embedded in it to trace the roots and mechanisms that engender precarity in the lives of tea garden labourers. Precarity of place enables us to unpack how the construct of the tea garden—with its history, practices, and controls—is loaded with uncertainty, vulnerability, and insecurity for the worker. The residence inside the tea gardens—sprawling over vast swathes of land, mostly isolated from the mainstream society and devoid of opportunities for mobility, constitutes a paradox for the tea garden workers. Expulsion from the tea garden poses the threat of destitution, homelessness, and unemployment for the worker and family. The threat of removal of the labourer from the tea garden is a major source of insecurity for the tea garden worker, which forces the worker to endure different exploitations. The power relations embedded in the tea garden constitute it as a precarious place for the workers and their families. The article traces the mechanisms in which this vulnerability and insecurity engender precarity for the tea garden workers of Assam in the post-reform period.

Tea garden labour in India has received constant attention from scholars in the last six decades. Bhowmik's (1980) analysis of the tea garden as a unique social system and its implications for capital-labour relations is a pioneering work in this area. Bhowmik and colleagues, focusing on the tea gardens of West Bengal have highlighted various aspects of the tea gardens such as the absence of women workers in the tea garden unions (Sarkar & Bhowmik, 1998) and labour unrest in the tea plantations and its causes (Bhowmik, 2015). Other authors have highlighted the problems plaguing the tea sector in Assam, such as labour unrest and the exploitation of labour (Misra, 2003), declining growth rate of yield, the declining growth rate of employment, and decreasing employment elasticity (Mishra et al., 2008), inter-generational mobility in the backdrop of crisis in the tea sector (Mishra et al., 2011), the impact of trade reforms on the plantation sector in India (Viswanathan & Shah, 2013), and changes in work participation and forms of employment among women in the tea sector (Rasaily, 2014). This strand of literature provides a critical analysis of labour–capital relations and the socio-economic backwardness of the tea garden population in the post-reform period. The second strand of scholarship has been advanced predominantly by historians, who look at the colonial mechanisms of capital accumulation through indentured labour and unfree labour conditions. The works of Behal (2006), Behal and Mohapatra (1992), and J. Sharma (2006, 2009, 2011) show how the colonial ideology and structure created and maintained an army of labour in an impoverished state for the exploitation of planters in colonial Assam.

An exhaustive survey of the literature on the tea garden is not possible here due to paucity of space, the preceding summary reflects the broad trends in the literature on tea gardens in India in general and Assam in particular. The works discussed above have shown us the structures of power during the colonial, post-colonial, and post-reform periods that rendered the tea garden labourers vulnerable to extreme exploitation and impoverishment. They highlight the objective capital–labour relations that adversely incorporate the tea garden labourers into the circuits of capital accumulation. However, there is a glaring gap, particularly in the literature pertaining to the post-reform period, on the subjective experiences of

social reproduction in the tea garden. Notable exceptions to the trends discussed above have been emerging on the subjective experience generated by the socio-political process and the structures outside and inside the tea gardens on the lives of the tea garden labourers. They are the works on the social reproduction of tea garden workers under precarious conditions in the tea gardens (Raj, 2013), the role of kinship in locking the tea garden workers and their families to the plantation system and perpetuating precarious conditions (Raj, 2023), and identity assertion among the tea tribe living outside the tea gardens (Kikon, 2017). The present article contributes to this emerging literature by examining place precarity in the social reproduction of tea garden labourers.

3. Data and Methods

The data for this article is drawn from our fieldwork carried out between January and October 2023 in two tea gardens in the Sonitpur District and Nagaon District of Assam. Access to tea garden workers and their families inside the tea gardens is difficult due to the surveillance practices of employers. We met our respondents outside the tea gardens. We did in-depth interviews with seven respondents from Sonitpur District. The duration of in-depth interviews with respondents from the Sonitpur District was from 45 minutes to one hour. We had long informal conversations with two respondents from Nagoan District over three visits. Our respondents consisted of two permanent tea garden workers, two temporary workers, three dependents of tea garden workers, and two ex-tea garden workers. One in-depth interview was conducted with a mid-level male manager from the Sonitpur District. Our respondents were in the age group of 40 to 65 years. Six of our respondents were males and three were females. The tea garden with which our respondents are associated in Sonitpur District employs 583 workers, which include 383 permanent workers and 200 temporary workers. Out of the 383 permanent workers 171 workers are male and 212 workers are female. The factory of the tea garden employs a total of 187 workers. Out of the 187 workers, 104 are temporary workers and 83 are permanent workers. Only 15 women are employed in the factory and all of them are temporary workers. The tea garden in Nagaon District with which our respondents are associated employs 530 workers. Out of the 530 workers, 300 are permanent workers and 230 are temporary workers. Out of the 300 permanent workers, 95 are male workers and 205 are female workers. The factory of the tea garden employs 92 temporary workers and 56 permanent workers. To protect the identity of the respondents we have not revealed the names of tea gardens where we undertook our field work. Further, we also use pseudonyms for our respondents. The article is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, we have discussed the concepts of precarity and precarity of place and explored our methods. In the fourth section, we discuss the crisis that followed the liberalisation period in the tea sector and its implication for labour. In the fifth section, we present our data and show the pathways of precarity in the tea gardens of Assam. In the last section, we conclude the article with a discussion.

4. Liberalisation and Crisis in the Tea Sector

The post-reform period in India, starting in the 1990s, ushered in a crisis for the tea sector. Following its membership in the WTO, the Government of India implemented economic reforms in the plantation sector and opened its markets to global competition (Viswanathan & Shah, 2013). The tea sector crisis was characterised by developments that were detrimental to the welfare of tea garden labourers in the following decades. India's position dropped from largest exporter of tea in the global market to fourth between 1990 and 2000 (Viswanathan & Shah, 2013). Authors who have analyzed the crisis in the tea sector have argued

that a combination of structural changes in the tea sector resulting from liberal trade policies and the prevailing exploitative labour–capital relations in tea gardens accentuated the precarious condition of the tea garden labourers in Assam (Mishra et al., 2008; Viswanathan & Shah, 2013). The production and labour use changes following the trade reforms period in the tea gardens in Assam are key to understanding the precarity of tea garden labourers and their families. Mishra et al. (2008) highlight three major changes in the 1990s and the early 2000s in the tea sector in Assam. They are (a) the decline in the growth rate of yield per hectare of tea cultivation, (b) a substantial decline in the rate of employment growth in the tea sector, and (c) a severe decline in the employment elasticity in the tea sector.

The decades of the 1990s and 2000s witnessed a slump in productivity in the tea gardens of Assam. The growth rate of yield per hectare for tea declined from 1.48% during the period 1981–1990 to −1.95 during the period 1998–2004. The slump in productivity is primarily attributed to the ageing of tea bushes in the tea plantations. Ageing of tea bushes reduces their productivity, therefore the plants need to be replanted periodically-ideally after they are fifty years old. This may seem like an intrinsic problem to the crop. However, this aspect of the plantation has implications for the productivity and welfare of the labourers. A large proportion of ageing tea bushes is the result of a lack of investment by firms in replanting and maintenance of tea gardens and the shifting of capital from the tea sector to other lucrative investment avenues. Considering that the structure of the tea sector is skewed towards large capital, where over 80% of the total area under tea cultivation is managed by corporate planters, the management of tea gardens is critical for the welfare of the labour (Viswanathan & Shah, 2013). The lack of investment in tea gardens by firms had a cascading effect on labour in the wake of declining exports and a drop in tea prices. The decades following the trade reform witnessed a substantial decline in the growth rate of employment in all the major districts of Assam. The growth rate of employment in Assam fell from 2.06% from 1981 to 1990 to 1.06% during the period 1991 to 2004. The third change in the post-reform period critical for the tea garden workers is the severe decline in the employment elasticity in the tea sector in Assam. The employment elasticity fell from 0.66% during the period 1980–1990 to 0.53% during 1991–2000. During the period 1998–2005, the employment elasticity declined drastically to −0.37%. Poor rate of employment growth and decline in employment elasticity means that fewer people are absorbed into jobs in the tea gardens of Assam. The disappearance of jobs in the tea sector creates a crisis for the households of tea garden workers as there are negligible opportunities for employment outside the tea garden. In parallel, the trend towards the casualisation of labour in the tea garden grew during this period, which has a profound influence on the experience of precarity for tea garden workers as casualisation takes away the job security and social security provisions attached to the permanent labour in the tea garden. As Mishra et al. (2008) have argued the costs of the structural adjustment in the tea sector following the trade reforms were entirely shifted to the tea garden labourers.

5. Pathways of Precarity

5.1. Casualisation of Labour and Precarity

Plucking tea leaves, spraying pesticides, and processing the tea leaves constitute the lion's share of operations in a tea garden. These activities are classified as "unskilled" and semi-skilled work and the majority of the labour force is deployed in these three activities in the tea garden. There is a gendered division of labour within these three activities. Plucking of tea leaves, which constitutes the primary activity

in the tea garden is exclusively carried out by women. Spraying pesticides and processing of tea leaves is predominantly carried out by men. However, a small share of experienced women labourers is allocated to the spraying and processing of tea leaves. The labourers engaged in these activities fall into two categories: permanent workers and temporary workers. Temporary workers are employed from March to December each year. The employment of temporary workers is not constant throughout the period between March to December as the yield varies, exhibiting peaks and falls within the period. For instance, the period between May to October is the peak season for plucking the tea leaves and requires a huge labour force. The engagement of temporary labour is at its maximum during this period. Similarly, men are engaged both permanently and temporarily in the processing of tea leaves in the tea factories and field activities such as spraying, pruning, and construction of drains in the field. The recruitment of temporary workers depends on the availability of work. The nature of temporary worker recruitment in the tea garden is seasonal and the lay-off period for the temporary workers, whose strength is more or less equal to the strength of the permanent workers, can extend from six to eight months during a year. A huge labour force within the tea garden languishes for a major part of the year without jobs and a livelihood. Thus, casualisation of labour is an important determinant of precarity for the tea garden labourers. Now we turn to the entitlements of permanent and temporary workers to see how the trade reforms have added a layer to the already existing layers of precarity.

Both permanent and temporary workers receive equal wages for their work. However, there is a wide gap in their entitlements that come as part of the work. The entitlements of a permanent worker include 14 days of paid sick leave in a year, paid annual leave, food grains for the worker and their dependent children, maternity benefits, housing facility within the garden, creche facility for the worker's children, firewood for cooking, drinking water supply, health facility, bonus, gratuity, provident fund, and pension. The temporary workers are entitled to food grains, a creche facility for children, a provident fund, a bonus, paid annual leave, maternity benefits, and paid sick leave. However, the majority of the temporary workers lose out on the benefits as they will not fulfill the minimum requirement to remain on the payroll for 80 days continuously in a year due to infrequent engagement in work. As one of our respondents—a mid-level manager—put it:

> For temporary [workers], the number of people availing this [the benefits] is very low because sometimes they do not even fulfil the eighty working days criteria in the last twelve months, which might be due to the irregularity in their deployment timings. [It is] also because they are not deployed on a full scale from the beginning of the season, like, they usually start on a small-scale deployment and when the quantity of the work increases, [the tea garden management] calls for more people [appoints temporary workers].

Employment casualisation through the policies of recruitment in the garden is only one layer of precaritisation experienced by tea garden workers. On preliminary examination, it might seem to affect only the temporary labourers. However, the casualisation of employment in the tea sector has a direct link to the global tea markets. The global trade structures perpetuate precarity for both permanent and temporary workers. We asked our respondent—a mid-level manager—to explain the factors influencing the rate of hiring of temporary workers in the tea garden. He explained:

> If the crop yield is more and our permanent workforce [is] not sufficient to get the entire crop harvested [in the] proper time—if the crop is not harvested on time, the crop will grow longer and, again, [lose

> in] quality. So based on those kinds of parameters the deployment of temporary workers is decided. With companies now focusing more on quality, it has become more of a trend to, like, ensure the crop is harvested in a timely [manner]. The permanent workers have to be engaged in other work as well. As already mentioned, some fixed work is going on around the year. Those kinds of work have to be done by the permanent workers only. So from that perspective, in a way depending on the market demand for quality, the company [intends] to harvest the crop on time to maintain quality and they have started increasing the intake of temporary workers.

Our respondent in other words explains that the global demand for the quality of tea is a major factor that controls the recruitment of temporary labourers in the tea garden. The quality demand in the global market drives a "race to the bottom" for the workers in the tea garden. Tea production is a seasonal enterprise. The scale of the workforce required during a particular period of the year varies across seasons. However, a large number of workers is required during peak season to produce the best quality of tea that will fetch high prices in the global market. The easiest way to make this possible is to maintain a large number of expendable workers in the tea garden and its vicinity. The maintenance of a large army of expendable workers is made possible through a set of practices that operate among permanent and temporary workers, which drives precarity among the tea garden workers.

5.2. Housing Insecurity and Precarity

While immobilisation characterised by coercion and physical violence constituted the tea garden space in the colonial period, immobilisation characterised by insecurity and dependency constitutes the tea garden space for workers in contemporary times. Housing and ownership of land are major factors in the insecurity that immobilises and constrains the workers of the tea garden. A set of practices around housing insecurity has been built on older ones that shape the precarity of the worker. Housing insecurity not only forces workers to stick to precarious work but also traps succeeding generations in tea gardens. Our respondent, Pradeep, who is a permanent worker in the factory of a tea garden in the Nagoan District, told us that the house provided by the tea garden is the main reason why he continues to work there. His father was a permanent worker in the tea garden and the job was transferred to Pradeep when his father retired from his job. The transfer of a job from parents to another member of the family is informally called the *badli* (change). The *badli* practice serves as a security against losing housing facilities, unemployment of family members, and expulsion from the tea garden. Management uses the *badli* practice not only to control the existing labourers but also to cut costs and reproduce casual labour from within the tea garden. Our respondent Daniel, who is an ex-worker of a tea garden in Sonitpur District, pointed out the recent trend in the *badli* practice that shapes precarity for the workers and their families. Previously the permanent worker had a choice to select the successor from among the family members at the time of retirement. However, in the past few years, workers have lost their control over job transference to relatives. Management influences decisions on the transference of jobs in such a way as to serve their interests and deprive the family of full benefits. Daniel explained:

> If both the parents are permanent employees, at the time of retirement of the father his job goes to the eldest son; at the time of retirement of the mother, even if the family wishes to transfer the job to the daughter or youngest son, the management will transfer the job to the wife of the eldest son who is already employed. Other dependents of the worker will be engaged as temporary workers and stay with the brother's family.

By ensuring the transference of jobs to the eldest son and daughter-in-law and not another dependent of the worker, management evades the obligation to provide additional housing facilities, firewood, and medical facilities. Further, management also ensures a reserve of casual labour residing in the tea garden without any additional obligation and depriving the workers of their benefits. In addition to all this, by holding control over the housing and income security of the family, in the future, management commands the subservience of the worker. Extremely poor education facilities within the gardens and lack of transport facilities to the nearest urban centers deprive the young people of the tea gardens of attaining better educational qualifications and skills, forcing them to settle for the precarious work available in the tea gardens. In conjunction with the eligibility for housing, the physical location of housing inside the plantation is a second factor that contributes to the precarity of labourers. The physical location of the tea garden, by being isolated from mainstream society, is cut off from a developed labour market and other educational facilities. Hence there are negligible opportunities for skill development and upward social mobility for the family members of the tea garden labourers. For instance, our respondents highlighted the poor condition of the tea garden school, which is the responsibility of the tea garden under the Plantations Labour Act 1951. An extremely limited number of teachers are appointed by management (the state government provides infrastructure) in garden schools. They are paid less and are compelled to supplement their income by engaging in other tasks in the factory or garden during the working hours of the school.

5.3. Wage Structure and the Precarity Trap

The structure of the wages in tea gardens is another important element that shapes precarity for tea garden labourers. The payment of wages in cash and kind as noted by Behal (2006) continues to be the basic structure of remuneration even today. Saha et al. (2019) have observed that around 50% of the wage is paid in cash and 50% in non-cash benefits. The non-cash benefits include water, electricity, medical bills, firewood, and a fixed quantity of wheat and rice. They further observed a wide discrepancy in the deductions marked on the pay slips across estates. The non-cash benefits such as firewood, water, and medical facilities, which are part of their remuneration are supposed to be benefits in addition to their actual wage, and the justification for low wages in the tea gardens. In practice, the value of the non-cash benefits is deducted from the wages of the tea garden worker. As a result, Saha et al. (2019) observed that the workers received cash payments much lower than mentioned on their pay slips. Despite the workers contributing a share of their earnings towards the non-cash benefits such as housing, ration, and medical services, the poor quality and quantity of these services force workers to part with a significant portion of their earnings to procure these services from the open market. Our respondent Daniel likened the distribution of medicines in the tea garden hospital to the distribution of roasted peanuts by *chanawala* (peanut seller) on the streets. The tablets are unwrapped, stored in containers, and distributed to the patients. The practice makes it impossible to identify the medicine and its quality. The poor quality, quantity, and irregularity of non-cash services provided by the tea gardens drain the workers' earnings but also leave them reliant on the same services in the event of any contingencies, creating a dependency on the tea gardens. The most severe consequence of the current wage structure is a negative income-expenditure gap for many workers. Saha et al. (2019) note that 38 percent of households that participated in their study had higher consumption expenditures than their income. The wage structure, poor quality and quantity of services, and the struggles to sustain life deprive the workers of creating assets or savings to invest in land or housing in a booming real estate market in rural Assam. Highlighting the exorbitant land prices, our respondent Charku, a tea garden worker from Sonitpur District informed us that a plot of one *Kattha* (2880 square feet), which is the minimum area required for building a house near his tea garden costs

2 lakh rupees (around $2,400). Anecdotal evidence suggests that migration in search of work to cities in North and South India has been taken up as a strategy by the family members in tea gardens to earn the savings needed to own a house (Hoque, 2021). However, such moves often result in human trafficking or exploitation in the destination, eventually forcing people to return to the tea gardens (Hoque, 2021).

5.4. Surveillance and Control as Precarity Drivers

Surveillance and control are major drivers of precarity that are amplified by the place precarity of the tea garden. Managers use a range of practices to increase the dependency of workers in tea gardens. The workers are dependent on the gardens for hard cash to meet contingencies such as death in the family, medical treatment, educational needs of their children, and marriage of their family members. The only source for workers is to avail themselves of a loan from their provident fund. However, accessing the facility entirely depends on the mercy of the manager. Our respondent Charku informed us that loan applications for the education of the children are mostly rejected by the manager. He cited his experience of applying for a provident fund loan to enroll his daughter in a general nursing course, which was rejected by the manager. The lack of any other source of available loans generates dependency for workers on the tea gardens.

Surveillance practices and punishments that once existed in the colonial tea gardens continue to make the tea garden worker vulnerable. Line chowkidars are still part of the tea garden administrative system and report to the manager or assistant manager twice a day. Line chowkidars are the intermediaries through which the power structure of the tea garden is imposed on the tea garden workers. The place precarity of the tea garden is amplified and to a great extent maintained through the line chowkidars. Line chowkidars are effectively used to curtail the efforts of tea garden workers to negotiate place precarity through establishing contacts with the outside world or organising among themselves. Our respondents informed us that line chowkidars report on absenteeism of workers and the reasons for that, disputes and fights among workers, the presence of outsiders in the workers' quarters, their identity and purpose of visit, information on any assemblies and meetings of workers in the line, and report on visitors during marriages and deaths in the workers' family and the duration of their stay. Workers are summoned in case of unfavourable reports and an enquiry is conducted by the manager. Workers engaging in "deviant" behaviour are punished by barring them and their family members from work. When workers are barred from work, they lose the day's wage. The looming threat of discontinuation of work is the major threat to the garden workers and prevents them from engaging in any activity that may antagonize the tea garden management. Contact with outsiders and receiving them in the worker's quarters are taken seriously by the tea garden management. The surveillance and penal practices induce insecurity in the workers and make them vulnerable to economic loss. The surveillance practices have severe implications for social mobility and their liberation from the tea garden system. By restricting any interactions and contacts with the outside world the workers are deprived of opportunities, resources, and the necessary social capital to improve their living conditions. The tea gardens as a physical place and the working hours in the tea garden also contribute to the deprivation of social capital for the tea garden workers. Shahadat and Uddin (2022) note that the starting time in the tea garden is "half an hour to an hour after sunrise" and work ends by sunset. The six days of work from sunrise to sunset and the seclusion of tea gardens from urban centers confine the workers mostly to the tea gardens.

5.5. Ethnicity, Identity, and Precarity

The colonial practices of managing the tea garden workers had severe implications for their social status in the larger Assamese society. Prominent among them was the ordering of the groups within the tea garden, which not only subscribed to the racial aspects of the people inside the garden but also the caste divisions outside the tea garden (Baruah, 2021; J. Sharma, 2011). J. Sharma (2011, p. 76) notes:

> Considerable distance and antagonism separated coolie labourers and the caste gentry who disciplined them on behalf of the white 'sahibs.' Many *mohurirs* possessed a full share of racial prejudices and class antagonisms to vent upon these migrant labourers scorning the tribal coolies as alien, ritually low intruders.

Ritually low status meant that the tea garden workers would occupy the lowest social status in the caste society comprising the tea gardens in its territorial ambit. Furthermore, the regressive aspects of tea garden life such as appalling housing conditions, existence as captive labour, subsistence wages, the regular physical violence endured in the form of flogging, sexual exploitation of female tea garden workers, and settlement in remote forested terrain contributed to the erosion of the social status of tea garden workers in Assamese society (J. Sharma, 2011). Existing notions of superiority and inferiority in the Assamese society, as noted by Mahanta (1997, p. 144)—"materially and intellectually relatively advanced non-tribal Assamese people of the valley…being precursors and torch bearers of sophisticated advanced life-ways in Assam, are obsessed with a notion of superiority in relation to the followers of the 'lowly' ways of life that is the tribal ways"—were quickly projected on to the tea garden workers. The practices that erode the social status of the tea garden tribe continue under the managerial system comprising employees from Assam and other states of India (Kikon, 2017). Systematic exclusion and othering of the tea tribe in Assamese society are intertwined with the place precarity of the tea tribe.

Scholars have argued that while the post-colonial state's welfare measures have failed to make any changes in the living conditions of the tea tribe, the mainstream society through its indifference to the struggles of the tea tribe has "othered" them (Gohain, 2007; Sumesh & Gogoi, 2021).

Kikon (2017) notes that neither are the tea tribes accommodated in the coalitions formed to demand indigenous tribal status and constitutional protection in the Northeastern states of India, nor are their ethnic status and cultural ways of life acknowledged in the numerous ethnic festivals organised in Assam. The deep resentment of this othering surfaced in our respondent Nelson's protest over the representation of the tea tribe women in the promotional videos of Assam tourism circulated in the media. Nelson, whose brother is a permanent worker and his wife a temporary worker in the tea garden in Sonitpur District, wondered why the tea tribe women are always shown as engaged in plucking tea leaves on the television or in advertisements while women from other tribal groups are shown as engaged in singing and dancing. Nelson's reflection on the portrayal of the tea garden women reveals a pathological reduction of the tea garden tribe as a source of labour only. Kikon (2017) observes a conspicuous silence on the experiences of the tea tribe in the literature on politics emerging from Northeast India. Dehumanizing practices in the tea gardens, political exclusion in the mainstream society, and the consequent erosion of social status for the tea garden workers and tea tribe in Assam, according to Kikon (2017), meant "the production of a racial and moral order that legitimised a culture of impunity and the denial of civic and political rights." Prominent among the reasons for the

disenfranchisement of the tea garden workers and tea tribe is the denial of their demand for tribal status, a form of protection enjoyed by their brethren in other states of the country who did not move into Assam to work in the colonial gardens. The lack of constitutional protection status plays out in multiple ways for the tea tribe, including the absence of protection from exploitation and violence within the tea gardens and social mobility. Lack of any such protection while they share a more vulnerable status compared to their peers in other states profoundly determines their experience of precarity.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on Banki's (2013) idea of place this work explored the production of precarity among tea garden workers in Assam. We explored how physical place intersects with the construction of a space such as the tea garden, through the structural practices in the tea garden, increased casualisation of labour through liberal trade policies, and the ethnicity of the tea garden workers, to define the experience of the precarity of one of the most vulnerable communities in Assam. While there is a long history of studies that have highlighted the poor living and working conditions of tea garden workers in India (Bhowmik, 1980; Xaxa, 1985) from the perspective of capital–labour relations, and migration and tribal studies, our study pioneers the examination of the experiences of tea garden workers through the lens of precarity. Our study is one of the first attempts from India to respond to the call to examine the role of geography and physical place in precarity. By focusing on the experience of precarity associated with immobilisation we address a different dimension of place precarity (Simpson et al., 2021). We add to the growing literature on place precarity by highlighting the implications of a constructed space such as the tea garden and the way it intersects with the physical place to shape experiences of precarity.

We have illustrated the practices and structures that reproduce insecurity and vulnerability for the tea garden workers. The physical location of the tea garden by its seclusion from urban centers and its rural locale deprives the tea workers and their families of using the services and availing themselves of the resources that have grown exponentially outside the tea garden (Banki, 2013). The intersection of the physical place of the tea garden, its management structure and practices hinging on neoliberal trade policies, and an indifferent mainstream society had a profound influence on the experience of precarity by the tea garden workers.

There is a dearth of literature from the Global South in general and India in particular that apply the precarity lens to study experiences of work and life of the poorest and vulnerable. This has been largely due to the understanding and application of precarity as a necessary condition attached to insecure work in post-Fordist economies, and the assumption that precarious work is a recent phenomenon that can be traced to the post-Fordist labour regime (Natarajan et al., 2019). However, rich work from scholars has emerged in recent times that unsettle the notion of precarity as a characteristic of work in the post-Fordist economies of the Global North and expands its application to the Global South context. For instance, Strauss (2018) argues that precarity is a function of social and economic structures and hence resists compartmentalisation to work alone, underscoring the pervasiveness of precarity in other spheres of life irrespective of the stages of national economic development. Similarly, Millar (2017) contests the perceived novelty in the application of precarity to the experience of workers in the Global North, suggesting that precarity has always been the characteristic of capitalism in the Global South. Our case of tea garden workers and the tea tribe, with their ontological experience of precarity determined by social, and economic

structures having their roots in colonial capitalism, justifies Strauss's (2018) and Millar's (2017) observations on the ontological experience of precarity and its application to the context of the Global South. The tea garden workers who are immobilised in the tea gardens by economic, social, and physical structures illustrate how precarity blurs the distinction between labour and life (Natarajan et al., 2019). The experiences of our respondents regarding the risk of losing work, increasing casualisation, retrenchment, suppression of welfare provisions, and insecurity hinge on both the place precarity of the tea garden as a space and its unfavourable inclusion in the broader circuits of capital accumulation.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Access to Labour and "Differential Inclusion" for Young Venezuelan Migrants in Ecuador

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Abstract

Young migrants and refugees provide important inputs concerning production and social reproduction mechanisms (care work) that reproduce unequal but highly profitable patterns of accumulation around the world. The expansion of globalisation and neoliberalism has deepened such social dynamics, leading to a "multiplication of labour." The diversification and heterogenization of migrant labour within neoliberal frameworks raise ethical and human rights concerns, including issues related to fair wages, working conditions, and access to social protections. After a neoliberal era in Latin America, the emergence of post-development politics in the region led to increased efforts to address the needs of these populations. This article seeks to contribute to debates about "differential inclusion" in South–South migration and access to labour and social protection by analysing a specific case study of young Venezuelans, a recently growing phenomenon that has a great impact on the region. Ecuador is noteworthy because it hosts one of the largest populations of Venezuelan migrants and refugees and has adopted a human rights perspective in conjunction with public investments in social policy, health, and education. Despite efforts to legalize the work status of Venezuelan migrants, a more restrictive policy began to be implemented in 2019 that limited their access to formal labour and social protection. Within these complex dynamics of differential inclusion, instead of seeing these young migrants and refugees as victims, we analyse their resilience strategies of accessing social provisions while coping with informality and irregular status, as well as conditions of multiplication of labour. Using four real-life stories as examples taken from a larger ethnographic study, we illustrate how dynamics of differential inclusion intersect with the gender, age, and legal status of young Venezuelans in Ecuador. The case studies are complemented with structural explanations from 6,000 household surveys collected between 2017 and 2020.

Keywords
displacement; human mobility; inclusion policy; labour insertion; South–South migration; Venezuela; youth

1. Introduction

In general, Ecuador remains underrepresented in the body of research addressing Venezuelan migration. Nevertheless, this country is a noteworthy case study concerning social policy and human mobility legislation since it included "universal citizenship" and the concept of *buen vivir* in its 2008 Constitution (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008). Ecuador has been well-known for its liberal policies since the left-wing government of Rafael Correa (2007–2017) defended a human-rights approach across different policy fields (Góngora-Mera et al., 2014).

The concept of *buen vivir* was enshrined in the Constitution in 2008 through the National System of Social Equity and Inclusion, which aims to address social policy in a manner that contrasts with neoliberal reforms. The key aspects of this approach include (a) expansion of rights, (b) strengthening state structures, (c) universal solidarity, and (d) focus on education and health (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008, Art. 340). This originated from debates about "post-development," based on alternatives to classical development models in Latin America and combined with emerging Indigenous movements' demands for autonomy and an expansion of their collective rights (Fackler et al., 2021). In this context, alternative development models such as the "good life" (*buen vivir*) became incorporated into Ecuadorian legislation (Gudynas & Acosta, 2011). Hereby, several concepts from contemporary academic debates on the subject of development were assimilated very quickly, such as (a) the new development and social policy model called "the *buen vivir* regime," (b) discourses around social inclusion promoted by the UN system on youth, and (c) subsequent debates about universal citizenship and human mobility.

Following the so-called "pink tide" trend in Latin America, Correa's government additionally constitutionalized the principle of universal citizenship in its 2008 Magna Carta and eliminated visa requirements for all foreigners. Furthermore, a "South American citizenship" was planned within the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), which would have allowed migrants' mobility between South American countries without restrictions (Ramírez, 2020). Nevertheless, the number of immigrants in Ecuador remained manageable until 2015: 500,981 immigrants, including people from Colombia, Peru, Cuba, Haiti, and Spain, among others, represented 3.1% of the total population (Herrera & Cabezas, 2019).

However, the Venezuelan exodus, because of its unprecedented nature in terms of magnitude and abruptness, generated a situation of uncertainty and triggered a shift in migration policy in Ecuador. Since 2019, Ecuador has belonged to a group of states that were previously characterized by greater openness, but which have become more restrictive and assumed a focus on internal security—"securitisation"—rather than a human rights perspective (Acosta et al., 2019). This restrictive policy hinders access to formal labour for young migrants and refugees. To survive and eventually cover the costs involved in obtaining legal status, most of them end up in the informal sector. Most of the recent studies focused on regularization provide evidence that more restrictive regularization measures lead to increases in the vulnerability of migrants and refugees (Álvarez Velasco et al., 2021; Burbano Alarcon et al., 2019; Herrera & Cabezas, 2019; Malo, 2021).

Although its constitution guarantees equality of rights for nationals and non-nationals, the government nevertheless excluded Venezuelan migrants and refugees from social protection (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021). Recent debates have pointed out that central governments in Latin America that operate based on "crisis management" leave the responsibility of integrating this population with international organizations and partners (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021). Thus, migrants and refugees have been seen as recipients of humanitarian aid instead of as subjects with their own rights and inclusion in long-term policies. Additionally, recent findings have shown a higher level of vulnerability for Venezuelans in the labour market, when compared to Ecuadorians (Banco Mundial, 2020; Célleri, 2019, 2020), as well as anti-Venezuelan discrimination in public services such as education and healthcare (Torres et al., 2022). There is also a wealth of important policy research on the expansion of rights and "human mobility" within the national legislation, as well as its limitations (Góngora-Mera et al., 2014); discrimination and exclusion of regularization processes (Herrera & Cabezas, 2019; Malo, 2021); securitization discourses (Pugh & Moya, 2020); health access (Torres et al., 2022); and social protection (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there is less research that explicitly focuses on the strategies of labour insertion of young refugees and migrants within this policy context. Indeed, this is particularly pertinent given the demographic composition of this population in the region. Therefore, by considering age, gender, sexual orientation, and legal status as important dimensions for "differential inclusion," this article seeks to understand the strategies of young Venezuelans in Ecuador to access labour and social provisions within the context of "multiple labour" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This contributes to debates on migration and social inclusion policy within the context of South–South migration and shows the importance of adapting social policy to young migrants and refugees in order to develop long-term strategies that enhance their potential as students and professionals.

2. Theoretical Framework

In Latin America, social policy discussions have been linked to debates about regional development. Starting in the 1980s, the question about the role of social policy in diminishing poverty replaced Marxist discussions on inequality and marginality from the 1970s (e.g., Quijano & Westwell, 1983). Whereas Latin America achieved a minimal reduction in relative poverty between 1980 and 2000, it remained the region with the highest inequality rates in the world (Fleury, 2005). Because inequality is a barrier to "social cohesion" or "integration into society," international organisations and governments in the region no longer focus on programs for "poor people," but rather on incorporating citizens into society (Acevedo & Valenti, 2017). In this sense, formal labour is seen as a main instrument for societal inclusion and has moved to the centre of debates about youth as strategic actors for regional development. Indeed, in 1985, the UN's *International Youth Year: Participation, Development, Peace* declaration illustrated the widespread priority for public policies to incorporate youth into the labour market (Ayala Román, 2011, p. 8). This growing consensus was strengthened by the "demographic bonus" phenomenon, which explores how the size of the working-age population—between 15 and 59 years of age—exceeds the population of dependents such as children and the elderly (Saad et al., 2012).

While youth became strategic actors for regional development in Latin America in the 1980s, regional structural adjustment reforms in the 1990s generated new development theories highlighting "social inclusion" as a core element for the construction of dense ties within civil society. Several debates from Europe pointed out that "social exclusion is the lack of capability to live a minimally decent life" (Sen, 2001, p. 4). Generally, among younger individuals, it has been widely discussed that difficulties entering the workforce and lack of access to income and associated social networks (i.e., social deprivation) lead to social

exclusion (Oxoby, 2009, p. 7). But within the context of South–South migration, this becomes problematic. It is difficult to consider "obstacles in entering the workforce" as an exclusion factor specific to migrants and refugees given the high percentages of informal local workers who also experience hazardous labour conditions. Accordingly, there are complex subjectivities around labour not only related to dynamics of differentiation influence and exclusion due to power relations, but also related to strategies of resilience and resistance within processes of inclusion.

For this reason, rather than focusing on the exclusion of young migrants through the lack of formal work, this article is based on the conception of "differential inclusion." Unlike critical migration studies that analyse borders as mechanisms of exclusion, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, p. 7) "see inclusion existing in continuum with exclusion, rather than in opposition to it." Therefore, the concept of differential inclusion highlights the nuanced and selective nature of migrants' incorporation into the receiving society's framework of rights and privileges (e.g., Könönen, 2018; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013). Studies about "intersectionality" have also focused on how diverse layers of inequality within categories such as gender, class, and age lead to discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991), influencing access to these resources (Klinger & Knapp, 2007). In this sense, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) introduce the concept of "differential inclusion" to challenge the conventional understanding of marginalized individuals living on the peripheries of society. Instead of seeing migrants as marginal subjects, they argue that those who live along global borders are actually essential actors. Indeed, they provide important inputs in terms of production and social reproduction (care work) that reproduce unequal but highly profitable patterns of accumulation. These processes lead to the construction and reconfiguration of societal dynamics in terms of employment, living conditions, and struggles.

Additionally, processes of "fragmentation and precarization have seeped into the shape of citizenship under the pressure of the flexibilization of the labour market" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 164). For this reason, Mezzadra and Neilson elaborated on the "multiplication of labour" concept as an alternative to the "international division of labour." Their analysis underscores the idea that labour is not a homogeneous or uniform category but rather a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by intersecting economic, legal, and social factors. As opposed to the stratified division of labour, their multiplication of labour thesis notes qualitative changes in global labour regimes which they refer to as intensification, heterogenization, and diversification. Intensification of labour refers to "the propensity of work to colonize more of life" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 90) which has led to a growing number of precarious workers who are unable to support their households and become indebted with credit interest payments. In this sense, the multiplication of labour is divided between the work of managing the financialized household and juggling positions in the precarious market with more flexible hours and lower wages. Diversification focuses on the multiplication of subjective labour positions not only based on tasks and skills and international division of labour, but also on legal conditions and statuses in global mobility regimes (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. 91). For example, local youth without access to quality education may face the same obstacles as migrants with better educational credentials. By examining the heterogenization of labour in the context of legal and social regimes, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, p. 88) suggest that the organization of labour is subject to diverse and often unequal structures and regulations. In fact, migrants are recognised in the Ecuadorian constitution as citizens with the same rights as Ecuadorians but are excluded from social provisions, such as the poverty bonus (a monthly payment for individuals and families in vulnerable economic situations).

For this reason, we argue for the importance of considering further conceptualizations about "welfare regimes" (e.g., Franzoni, 2005), meaning the structures and policies that govern social provisions, including access to benefits such as healthcare, education, housing, and social assistance. In this sense, in addition to the multiplication of labour (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) and precarization of migrant labour (De Genova, 2007; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013), other authors such as Corrigan (2014) and Shutes (2016) highlight the significance of the *type* of welfare regime in influencing the economic and social well-being of non-citizens within a society. Therefore, the access of young migrants to public services is influenced by a multitude of factors, including the varied levels of intensification, heterogenization, and diversification of labour, but also the specific challenges they face due to their migrant status.

While the importance of legal status in accessing social benefits has been addressed in the field of social policy (Corrigan, 2014; Shutes, 2016), further studies claim to examine the nuanced differences between legal status and level of access to welfare benefits (Könönen, 2018). Following MacAuslan and Sabates-Wheeler (2011), even when migrants are formally entitled to social provisions, they often face significant barriers that result in unequal access (e.g., discrimination based on nationality, gender, and age). Examining migrants' access to social provisions requires a comprehensive analysis that goes beyond formal rules and policies. We must consider the practical mechanisms and processes through which social services are distributed, as well as the complex negotiations and interactions that occur among various stakeholders in these settings (MacAuslan & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011). Based on this assessment, these authors suggest three strategies employed by migrants: (a) exit from the public system due to higher costs; (b) incorporation and dependency on the public system (MacAuslan & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011, pp. 81–82); and (c) negotiation and protest (Schaffer & Lamb, 1974). Based on our research results, we discuss these three strategies and add a fourth: change of residence due to diverse local and international social provisions.

We argue that, despite recent neoliberal reforms in Ecuador and the shrinking of state capacities and social protection, migrants must have developed resilience strategies to secure social provisions from labour markets, receive public services, and gain network-based relations by coping with exclusion dynamics of labour access and regularisation. By understanding these diverse strategies, this article seeks to understand the complex dynamics within the context of South–South migration, since post-development perspectives on social policy in some countries in Latin America, such as Ecuador, expanded services (with different scopes and at least formally) to more vulnerable populations, including migrants and refugees.

3. Methodology

This analysis is based on data collected with an ethnographic qualitative approach between 2019–2021 and complemented with surveys about the labour situation of Venezuelan migrants in Quito. Twenty-five cases of young Venezuelans (between 18–29) were chosen using non-probability sampling, specifically chain-referral sampling, which is more convenient for hard-to-locate populations (Penrod et al., 2003) and has been used for researching migrant youth (Pun, 2019). The main set criteria for the selection of participants were: (a) they must be at least 18 but no more than 29 years old; (b) they must either seek to access university studies (having recently finished their secondary school studies) or have partially or fully completed university studies; (c) they must have arrived with the first wave to Ecuador (2015–2017); and (d) they must be willing to share their life stories. The young population in this age group was heterogeneous, representing different ages and levels of education. Some only finished secondary school but most of them

have at least an undergraduate degree and university-level studies, which corresponds to the tendency noted in the first wave of Venezuelans arriving to Ecuador between 2015 and 2017 (Célleri, 2019). The participants had different genders, sexual orientations, and household situations. As a participant observer, the author built a testimony of their strategies to gain labour access and confront barriers deriving from national policy measures, such as those imposed by the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES), Ministry of Labour, and the Secretary of Higher Education, Science and Technology (SENESCYT), as well as responses arising from local governments in association with international cooperation for humanitarian assistance. In order to understand the dynamics revealed in the testimonials from other perspectives, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts and leaders working with public and international institutions and migrant organisations. Based on Mayring's qualitative analysis approach, the coded data was interpreted in order to answer the objectives of this study (Mayring, 2015).

Furthermore, the case studies were contextualised with structural explanations from 6,818 household surveys collected for the project Labour Situation and Economic Contribution From Immigrants in Quito—which was coordinated between 2017 and 2020 by the author (for further details see Célleri, 2019, 2020). Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, these surveys were collected from Venezuelan families in Quito regarding their labour situation. As of 2018–2020, this is the most representative study for the city of Quito and was validated by migrant organizations, public institutions, and NGOs. Important dimensions of the survey were: labour situation, formal/informal work, access to social provisions, and gender and age differences. Due to the lack of official data about migrants and refugees living in Ecuador, quantitative data will be complemented with field reports collected by international organisations or other recent studies at national and local levels.

4. Ecuador's Policy on Human Mobility and Venezuelan Migration

Ecuador's legislation has made the country stand out internationally, especially due to the inclusion of a human rights approach to migration policy (Góngora-Mera et al., 2014). The "human mobility policy" constituted an important part of the new Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008 (Célleri, 2018). This concept involves the opening of international borders to ensure respect for human rights and civil rights of all persons based on the concept of "universal citizenship" (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008, Art. 416). This means that all people have the same rights on Ecuadorian territory, regardless of where they were born (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008, Art. 9, Art. 416). Accordingly, social policy was based on the National System of Social Equity and Inclusion (Art. 340) which aims to expand rights and social policy for people in "vulnerable" conditions by strengthening state structures, based on values of "universal solidarity" in fields such as education and health, in contrast to neoliberal reforms (Acevedo & Valenti, 2017). The MIES (2020) is responsible for implementing this approach. Above the MIES, the National Councils for Equality were supposed to "exercise powers in the formulation, mainstreaming, observance, monitoring and evaluation of public policies related to gender, ethnic, generational, intercultural, disability and human mobility issues" (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008, Art. 156).

Therefore, between 2006 and 2017, the Ecuadorian government was considered a model for enhancing state capacity in social service and education. Some scholars have highlighted significant advances in access to public services and improvements in the redistribution of resources for the population (Albuja, 2019, p. 7). Nevertheless, these policies have not enhanced the participation of previously excluded populations (Bastidas, 2020, p. 67) nor extended labour opportunities beyond public structures (Albuja, 2019, p. 8).

Due to Ecuador's economic crisis in recent years, new governments and budgets have seen a reduction in social policy. Since 2015, the investment in social policy has been reduced by half and further budget reductions continue to be made. Similarly, several institutions have suffered budget cuts or were subsumed into other structures of lower rank, reflecting their reduced prioritization. This was the case for the National Directorate for Youth and Adolescents, an adjunct to the MIES, which was in charge of coordinating the implementation of inclusion policy in education with the Ministry of Education and the Secretary of Higher Education, Science and Technology, as well as labour issues with the Ministry of Labour (see MIES, 2016). The National Directorate for Youth and Adolescents was replaced by the Technical Secretariat for Youth in 2017, and eventually eliminated in 2020 (Contraloría del Ecuador, 2021). Currently, the MIES is in charge of public policy implementation in the area of social protection for young people, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility is responsible for human mobility. In this sense, youth and human mobility policy were not only relegated to sub-institutions within national ministries, but they also lost ground for further policy implementation. Likewise, the Councils of Equality have lost budgetary support and the power of advocacy through the abolition of the National Secretariat for Planning and Development in 2019 by presidential decree No. 732 (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2019).

In this context, Ecuador has become the third-highest receiving country of Venezuelan migrants (approximately 474,945) in South America, following Colombia and Peru (R4V, 2023). At least two phases of arrival can be differentiated. In the first wave, between 2015 and 2017, those who arrived included more young people with professional experience or university degrees. The group arriving in the second phase, between 2018 and 2019, had fewer qualifications and generally sought more basic services, such as healthcare (Herrera & Cabezas, 2019; Torres et al., 2022). During the first wave, many sought to live in the larger cities such as Quito and Guayaquil or stayed in small cities next to the northern border, such as Ibarra. Afterwards, other cities such as Cuenca and Manta became more attractive to Venezuelans due to their pre-established networks, labour demand and support from local governments, and international cooperation. As of 2020, Venezuelan migrants and refugees account for 3.7% of the working-age population in Ecuador, and it has been shown that their impact is minimal in the labour markets of cities with denser populations of Venezuelans (Quito and Guayaquil) when compared with their impact in other cities (Olivieri et al., 2022, p. 7). The average Venezuelan in Ecuador is 26 years old, three years younger than the average Ecuadorian (Banco Mundial, 2020, p. 16). Even if the Venezuelan population shows a higher level of post-secondary and university education when compared to nationals, the vast majority of them do not work in their professions. Multilateral experts estimate that 52% of the Venezuelan population is engaged in the informal sector (Banco Mundial, 2020) and that 59.7% are "self-employed" (International Organization for Migration, 2019).

While some efforts have been made to regularise the situation of Venezuelan migrants, a more restrictive migration and refugee policy began to be implemented in 2019 (Herrera & Cabezas, 2019; Malo, 2021; Pugh & Moya, 2020). After hosting Venezuelans between 2016 and 2018 based on regional agreements (UNASUR and the Andean Pact), in 2019 the Ecuadorian Government imposed an entry visa—euphemistically identified as a "humanitarian visa" (VERHU, for its Spanish acronym)—to Venezuelans, closing its borders to them. This visa does not apply to the nationals of any other Latin American country. Since then, only 94,428 Venezuelans have been regularised through two processes of supposedly "humanitarian visas" (Colectivo de Geografía Crítica, 2021). Access through irregular paths has been steadily increasing from 385,042 in 2019 to 502,214 in 2022 (R4V, 2023). Furthermore, since 2019, police and

migration controls increased with the media's criminalization discourses and the government's emphasis on "national security" (Célleri, 2023; Pugh & Moya, 2020).

Along these lines, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility has shown very limited advances in integration and inclusion policy. The creation of the Unit for the Protection of the Foreign Community in 2015 led to improved attention for Ecuadorians abroad; however, state services do not cover the large existing demand of migrants and refugees in Ecuador, and the benefits offered by the state services are often unknown (Célleri, 2018). The pre-existing social protection program, Human Development Bond, has been limited to Ecuadorian nationals since 2019 (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021, p. 16). In this sense, the services extended through other local bodies, such as local governments, have demonstrated effective coordination with other local and international organizations. Indeed, the "humanitarian assistance" for the Venezuelan crisis is mostly covered by support from international cooperation (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021). As this article discusses, policy development for the inclusion of migrants and refugees is scarce. This could be a consequence of government's willingness to reduce migration by rendering migrants ineligible for social provisioning (MacAuslan & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011, p. 76).

The Human Mobility Law enacted in 2017 was reformed in 2021 with a far greater focus on deportation. Art. 143.7 now sets forth that those who threaten national security may be deported (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2021). According to Venezuelan migrant organizations, employers now use this resource by declaring their workers to be "thieves" or "violent." In many cases, this allows employers to avoid paying wages if they present this complaint to the police. Interviewed Venezuelan workers often express that they do not have the possibility of defending themselves because they are only made aware of these complaints once they require a criminal record or similar documentation for their visa renewal process. Therefore, many Venezuelan migrants have remained irregular, are afraid of being deported, and prefer to search for independent work in the informal sector.

In terms of regularisation, although new regularization campaigns with the "humanitarian visa" (VERHU) have been promoted since 2019, it is estimated that more than half of the Venezuelans living in Ecuador have irregular status. Our results in Quito showed that more than 70% did not have an updated passport. Similarly, more than 55% of the total number of people surveyed stated that they did not have the economic resources to regularize their migration status (Célleri, 2023). Asylum has become an almost impossible avenue since the criteria are not clear and many applications have been denied (Haro, 2020). Our surveys in Quito showed that just 28% of migrants and refugees signed a formal job contract and just 12% had affiliation with social security (Célleri, 2019). Youth is another burden: 82.6% of young people between 18 and 29 years of age were not contributing to the social security system in 2019 (International Labour Organization, 2020a, p. 26). As many young migrants are confronted with the multiplication of labour and differential inclusion, resulting in very limited access to public institutions, they develop resilience strategies, as exemplified by the following cases.

5. Strategies of Young Venezuelan Migrants

5.1. Exit From the Public System Because "It's More Expensive to Follow the Formal Rules" (Jenny, 18)

Jenny (Quito, 18) arrived in Ecuador with her mother and younger brother in 2017 by irregular means through the northern border. Her mother found informal work as a housekeeper. She and her brother were able to

enter secondary school without regular status. But in 2021, despite being the best-performing graduate of her school for the year, she was not allowed to receive academic awards and could not take the application test for public universities because she did not have a valid passport and visa. Two years ago, she wanted to study computer science, but now she works informally in a variety store and only thinks about receiving money to help her mother, who does not earn more than 300 USD a month. After two years, she is saving funds to emigrate to Spain to live with her uncle and to someday achieve her dreams of seeking further studies.

Despite her academic achievements, Jenny encountered barriers in accessing higher education and navigating her migrant status. The additional challenge of not having access to scholarships due to her "non-national" status further complicated matters. Jenny's decision to not affiliate with the social system was likely influenced by the fear of reduced salary and increased regularization costs. This is a difficult choice to make, as it involves weighing immediate financial concerns against potential long-term benefits.

The intensification and diversification of labour contribute to a situation where most migrants and refugees receive lower wages and work more hours than the local population. Our results indicate that only 36% in the north and 21% in the south of Quito earn between 300 and 400 USD, and the majority earn less than 200 USD per month, i.e., they barely cover a minimum wage. This is particularly evident in the field of services and informal sales where, while an Ecuadorian could earn 20 to 25 USD per day, a migrant earns at most half of this salary with a heavier workload and longer workday (Célleri, 2019, 2020). Most of the informal service work is done by young women such as Jenny.

With respect to differential inclusion, although there is a normative openness in public policy for the inclusion of young people and access to public universities based on merit and regardless of social class, exclusion is carried out on the basis of nationality and legal status. Without regular status, migrants are not allowed to take the public university admissions test, even though this test was originally created for the "democratization" of higher education (SENESCYT, 2012). Even migrants with regular status face barriers in obtaining scholarships or economic support, as these benefits are only available for Ecuadorians (SENESCYT, 2022). As a young woman, Jenny will not find social support at the MIES either, because it has only partial projects for young migrants and refugees with the support of international cooperation, but mainly focuses on "entrepreneurship" or "leadership" (MIES, 2021). Indeed, Venezuelans were excluded from social policy per presidential decree in 2019. Labour policy is also sparse for youth and, although some capacitation programs for professional qualifications were offered by the Ministry of Labour, the few existing programs offering internships for access to a "first job" for formal labour insertion scarcely include migrants or refugees.

5.2. Incorporation and Dependency on the Public System: Staying in Silence to Maintain Access to Health Services

Jorge (Quito, 25) is an occupational safety engineer and LGBT leader of several initiatives for migrants and refugees from Venezuela. He had to leave Venezuela, not only due to his sexual orientation, but especially because he could not afford or find retroviral medication for his AIDS-positive health status. With the expectation of universal access to health services in Ecuador, he tried to apply for asylum upon arriving in Quito. However, as some of his friends did not receive refugee status, he decided to apply for a UNASUR visa and later for a humanitarian visa. After two years of applying for jobs in several places such as security enterprises, small businesses, and the public sector, where he was categorized as "overqualified," he got a

job at a private school without a stable contract. However, he was able to be affiliated with the Social Security Institute. Not only did this allow him to receive his retroviral medication as he did before, but also to get periodical medical support. For this reason, he accepted the low pay and precarious work conditions. However, his health status and sexual orientation came to light a year into the job during a medical review at his workplace, and the following week he was fired. He preferred not to file a legal complaint and to return to working informally on the streets with the expectation of being able to find another "formal" job.

Jorge decided not to report this discrimination based on sexual orientation to authorities in order to maintain access to health services. Presenting a legal complaint to the Ombudsman's Office implies a great deal of paperwork and legal support, and the few who choose to do so prefer to work through migrant associations and LGBT community support. Nevertheless, it is difficult to pursue and prove most cases of labour discrimination with such limited capacities. While these demands should technically be directed to the Ministry of Labour, Jorge, like many young Venezuelan refugees and migrants, is afraid to visit them because of the labour inspections and migration controls which have increased since 2019 with the government's securitization measures. This situation reveals the heterogenization of institutions providing migrants with tools to assert their rights as non-nationals, while also subjecting them to the fear of restrictive migration control policies.

5.3. Negotiation and Protest: Speaking Out and Being Punished With Social and Labour Exclusion

Maria (Ibarra, 22) was studying finance in Venezuela but interrupted her studies to migrate to Ecuador. She started working as a waitress in Quito in order to fund further studies. She then got a job as an "assistant" in Ibarra with a small business, where she experienced sexual harassment from her boss. The intensification of labour was evident in the job's 24/7 demands, which included intimacy and sexual exploitation from the employer. Maria couldn't stand the situation and, by seeking help from the Human Mobility Roundtable of Imbabura, which has existed since 2009, she was able to report her case and recover three months' pay that her boss had not recognized during her "probationary period." However, she was unable to find another job. Ibarra is a small city on the northern border and her case did not go unnoticed. While she was able to regularize her visa with the support of local organizations, she could not easily support herself without work. It was very difficult for her to find another job in Quito during the pandemic (2021), so she decided to return to Venezuela afterwards.

Maria decided to move to a new city for a job opportunity despite losing her networks of family and friends. Nevertheless, once she experienced sexual harassment, Maria used her voice and got local support. The Human Mobility Roundtable of Imbabura has been consolidating the country's largest network of services for migrants and refugees. Local governments at all levels, the public sector, civil society, and international organizations collaborate within this platform, and it has been a model practice for responding to emergencies or concrete demands from migrants and refugees (Prefectura de Imbabura, 2019). Public institutions such as the Ombudsman's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility, and the provincial government of Imbabura chair this Roundtable together with other international organizations. Service areas such as legal rights, labour, gender and diversity, education, and human trafficking and smuggling are among the board's priorities. Gender violence has been a very frequent phenomenon, and some legal actions have been taken in favour of the protection of young women. Additionally, the "Protection Councils" have been activated within local governments, alongside greater local government

participation of migrants and refugees. Nevertheless, Maria's case shows that, without labour opportunities or socioeconomic inclusion policy at the national level, humanitarian attention at the local level is brief and limited. As a young Venezuelan woman, she was hypersexualised on the one side, and on the other side, she was "punished" for speaking out, also in her own social networks back in Quito. In this context of differential inclusion, young women, particularly migrants, may receive short-term local support after raising their voices due to their vulnerable positions. However, this support often comes with conditions or consequences that ultimately exclude them from accessing the labour market.

5.4. Change of Residence due to Diverse Local and International Social Provisions

Mariana (Manta, 27) is a single mother with a six-year-old son who arrived in Quito and then moved to Manta (Ecuador's central coast) in 2019. She entered by regular means so she was able to obtain a temporary visa, which she could afford with her savings. Before moving, she worked as a nurse in Venezuela with a minimum wage that was not enough to pay for food and survive with her young son. In Ecuador, she planned to continue working in her profession as a nurse. To do so, she first needed to register her university degree at SENESCYT. She started with the paperwork in 2020 but received a rejection without any explanation after a year. She tried again but, as of 2023, she is still waiting for the results. When the pandemic started, nurses were needed in the public health system, but she couldn´t apply without this registration approval. When she moved to Manta, she started an informal food stand with initial assistance from local organizations financed through international cooperation. In theory, intensifying her work schedule and incorporating childcare into the restaurant operations would allow her to reduce debts while also strengthening her position in the competitive local food market. In reality, she is exhausted, scraping by on a basic salary and barely able to pay her rent and daily expenses.

Moving to another city in search of support can be a viable short-term strategy. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that, while this strategy may provide short-term relief or access to certain services, it may not necessarily lead to a stable long-term employment perspective. Despite the fact that SENESCYT has recognized an important number of university degrees, most of these processes are restrictive when taking into account the difficult process of getting official documents from Venezuela (International Labour Organization, 2020b, pp. 65–67). Even if Mariana could receive support in completing her paperwork from local organizations, another barrier must be overcome: Employment in the public sector entails many additional requirements, among them a work authorization stating that "no Ecuadorian person can do the work" (Ministry of Labour, 2015). These barriers led Mariana to change her locality and seek support from local initiatives and international organisations as a single mother.

An important number of female Venezuelan migrants work in areas such as medicine and health sciences (International Labour Organization, 2020b). If promoted by national labour policy, they could enter into the public sector. But once again, differential inclusion allows Mariana to access education and health services, but not public labour. In the private sector, many employers will not hire "foreigners" because of the stereotype about a "temporary" stay and the difficult verification of employment references from Venezuela (International Labour Organization, 2021). Migrants and refugees have to demonstrate their eligibility and have higher costs in doing so (MacAuslan & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011, p. 76).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The social inclusion policies enshrined in Ecuador's constitutional reforms opened doors to the expansion of rights, including for youth in conditions of human mobility. Nevertheless, without strong coordinating mechanisms and institutions for human mobility and youth policy development, these provisions are subject to differential inclusion for young migrants who could otherwise have greater socio-economic contributions. These testimonials reflect the contradictions in young migrants' experiences between accessing public services such as education and health, while simultaneously navigating intensification, diversification, and heterogenization of labour (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). The first example demonstrates how the decision to exit the public system (MacAuslan & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011, pp. 75–76) led to exploitation, as Jenny's legal status did not guarantee that her labour rights would be enforced. She decided to stay outside of the system to save costs in order to plan for a future abroad. The second strategy demonstrates loyalty to the system (MacAuslan & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011, p. 74) that made Jorge "dependent" on public health services, given that migratory status is an important component of discrimination in health insurance coverage. Nevertheless, Jorge's decision allowed him to receive healthcare access that may seem unthinkable for him. In the third situation, Maria was forced to denounce the abuses she was subjected to, but she was subsequently excluded from job opportunities and from her network-based system (Schaffer & Lamb, 1974). Instead of offering her more opportunities, this decision constrained her from social provisions. Finally, Mariana's decision to relocate in search of support from local initiatives can indeed be, as we argue, a legitimate strategy for accessing social provisions. However, this doesn't guarantee immediate access to stable employment. Despite her relevant qualifications and the high demand for health personnel due to the Covid-19 pandemic, she was not even able to access a nursing position in a public hospital.

These cases show how the intersectionality of age, immigration status, and gender play a central role in differential inclusion dynamics (Andrijasevic, 2009; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) affecting the access to resources (Klinger & Knapp, 2007) such as labour and social provisions. The individuals' strategies for attempting to navigate the multiplication of labour underscore the need for developing further concepts around "welfare regimes" and inclusion policies. The latter cannot be achieved through the implementation of policies or the establishment of systems that render migrants ineligible for social provisions when governments aim to discourage migration.

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Conflict of Interests

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Hyper-Precarious Lives: Understanding Migration, Global Supply Chain, and Gender Dynamics in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article examines the lived experiences of precarity in Bangladesh's ready-made garments (RMG) industry, focusing on female migrant workers employed in Dhaka and surrounding industrial areas. Over the past three decades, the growth of the RMG sector has attracted economically disadvantaged rural women, distancing them from their traditional domestic and agricultural roles. This sector predominantly employs young women due to their perceived flexibility, low wages, and limited union involvement. Additionally, their status as "unskilled" workers in the lowest echelons of a gender-stratified labour market, along with the influence of socio-cultural power dynamics, constrains their capacity to negotiate their positions effectively. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic research conducted in Dhaka and Gazipur, this article unravels the intricate interplay between insecure labour conditions, the impact of the global supply chain, and gender dynamics. It underscores the pivotal significance of socio-cultural power dynamics in understanding the vulnerability experienced by female migrant labourers. We assert that a comprehensive understanding of precarious work requires recognising the inherent link between precarious employment and precarious life within the broader context of socio-cultural power dynamics, gender norms, and societal relations.

Keywords

expendable labour; gender inequality; global supply chain; health; intersectionality; ready-made-garment industry; well-being; young female migrant

1. Introduction

This article examines the multifaceted factors influencing the hyper-precarious circumstances faced by migrant female workers in the ready-made-garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh, and considers the hierarchy present in global supply chains, working conditions, and socio-cultural power dynamics within this thriving sector in the country.

Over the past three decades, the expansion of the RMG sector has enticed millions of economically disadvantaged rural women, redirecting them from their traditional domestic and agricultural roles. The sector primarily employs young women due to their perceived flexibility, low wages, and limited union representation. The need for cost-effective labour in global assembly lines and the growing poverty and marginalisation of women in rural production systems resulting from the mechanisation of agricultural work has facilitated women's entry into the labour market (see also Bal et al., 2021a).

The RMG sector plays a crucial role in Bangladesh's economy. The country has consistently upheld its global stature in this sector, maintaining its position as the second-largest apparel exporter in 2020 and 2021, despite facing disruptions due to the pandemic (WTO, 2022). In the fiscal year 2021–2022, the sector contributed 81.82% of the country's total exports (BGMEA, 2023), underscoring the nation's notable reliance on this single source of foreign income. Scholars have identified the vast labour force, low wages, suitable locations, and export-friendly policies as the competitive advantages of Bangladesh's RMG industry (Bari & Jin, 2021; Hossain, 2012; Islam, 2021; Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004; Mostafa & Klepper, 2018). Despite the RMG sector's pivotal role in driving the Bangladeshi economy, its labour scenario continues to be characterised by a significant degree of flexibility and uncertainty. Bangladesh currently holds the third-lowest minimum wage in the garment industry, set to increase from 8,000 BDT (73.60 USD) to 12,500 BDT (114.16 USD) as of November 2023, ranking behind only Ethiopia and Madagascar (Fleck, 2022).

Despite claims that the industry offers job opportunities and autonomy to economically disadvantaged rural migrant women with lower levels of education, a substantial gender-based gap persists within the RMG sector. Female workers usually start as helpers, undergo months of training before becoming sewing machine operators, and, with experience, may advance to supervisory positions. Conversely, men generally occupy higher-paid positions with greater authority, such as managers, supervisors, workers in cutting and finishing sections, or machine mechanics. However, these disparities also expose women to gender-based violence and gender inequalities both within and outside the factories (cf. Action Aid, 2019). Many women face inadequate compensation, unrecorded overtime, and limited opportunities for career advancement (e.g., Bal et al., 2021a, 2021b; Strümpell & Ashraf, 2021).

Much of the existing research on RMG in Bangladesh predominantly focuses on precarious working conditions in general, often overlooking the gender dimension. This article, grounded in extensive ethnographic research, argues that intricate interconnections between cultural norms and diverse power dynamics construct precarity within the workplace and in society. It also makes a two-fold contribution to the discourse on precarity, global supply chains, and gender. First, it disentangles the complex relationships between precarious and expendable labour, gender, and the supply chain. Second, it emphasises the crucial intersectional role of socio-cultural power relations in assessing the precarity experienced by female migrant workers, highlighting the necessity for a comprehensive examination that encompasses their real-life experiences.

The article is organised as follows: It begins with the methodology and theoretical sections, followed by a discussion that addresses three interconnected aspects related to the emergence of hyper-precarity. These aspects include: (a) the construction of precarity within the global supply chain, particularly concerning time, wage, and work pressure as experienced by the lowest strata within it; (b) the influence of time, wage, and work pressures on the health and well-being of female RMG workers; and (c) the examination of socio-cultural power dynamics within the workplace and in everyday life. The concluding section summarises our main findings on the complex, multifaceted, gendered, and intersectional aspects of precarity in Bangladesh's RMG sector.

2. Methodological Approach and Migration Background of Research Participants

This article draws from a wide range of qualitative research methods, including ethnography, in-depth interviews, and participatory action research conducted among female RMG workers in different areas of Dhaka and Gazipur from 2016 to 2018. These research activities were part of a broader project focusing on young female migration, livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive rights (SRHR) in Dhaka (for details see Bal et al., 2024). Follow-up interviews and informal discussions were conducted with labour activists and 15 workers in 2020, 2023, and 2024. This research employed a snowball approach and covered broad discussion topics, including migration, SRHR, work trajectories, everyday negotiations at home and work, and plans for the future. The study encompassed a diverse cohort of participants, ranging from unmarried, married, widowed, and separated women to individuals from various ethnic minority backgrounds, such as Bengalis, Garo, and Chakma, aged 15 to 45. This inclusivity enabled a comprehensive exploration of intricate migration patterns, urban work experiences, interpretations of work, reasons for migration, connections with rural areas, and considerations about leaving employment.

After familiarising ourselves with the research participants, 35 life story interviews and 81 semi-structured interviews were conducted with RMG workers (both married and unmarried) at their homes (after work or during the weekend) or in the village during the Eid holiday. Besides, living near the workers' colony enabled us to engage with the participants extensively, from early mornings before they headed to factories, evenings after working hours, to extended periods during the weekends. This closeness facilitated the development of strong connections with female garment workers, involving ongoing communication through platforms such as Facebook Messenger and IMO. Additionally, seven factory owners and 25 mid-level employees were interviewed. The participatory action research approach also allowed us to pinpoint the most challenging issues for the RMG workers. Over a year, a female RMG worker from our labour union partner facilitated ten sessions, each with 13–20 participants, focusing on work, gender, migration, and reproductive health while we were present as observers. The sessions were carefully designed to create a safe space for open discussion exclusively among female migrants, free from potential repercussions at home, at work, or in their communities.

In-depth interviews were conducted in an informal conversational style, systematically validating the consistency of their narratives. Several participants engaged in multiple interviews, while ongoing interaction was sustained with others throughout the two-year research period, and some participants continued to remain connected. All research activities were conducted exclusively in Bengali, automatically ensuring respondent anonymity. We ensured consistency checks on the transcripts and categorised the data into themes to analyse the interaction between rural-urban migration, work experiences, and gender norms.

Most of the Bengali research participants migrated from environmentally stressed regions, predominantly the Sirajganj district, impacted by riverbank erosion and flooding, while some were from drought-prone regions in the northern part of the country. Indigenous Garos and Chakmas migrated from economically impoverished areas in Mymensingh and Bandarban districts. Despite differences in age, ethnicity, and family situations, all participants shared a common goal: escaping severe financial struggles. Divorced and separated women moved to cities due to social stigma, village job scarcity, and urgent financial needs. Unlike previous migrations with families, most participants moved alone for work, often due to the lack of male family companions. Families still consider female migration a last resort. Their move aimed to alleviate extreme poverty rather than seeking independence, yet they hoped for some economic progress (see also Bal et al., 2021a; Shewly et al., 2020).

3. Theoretical Discussion: Hyper-Precarious Lives

Although labour precarity has historical roots, its emergence in scholarly discourse started in the 1970s with a significant emphasis on the neoliberal shaping of flexible, contingent, and irregular forms of labour (Allison, 2014; Strauss, 2018). As defined by Kalleberg (2009), precarious work encompasses employment marked by uncertainty and unpredictability from the worker's perspective. In contemporary terms, precarity is commonly understood as a condition arising from an employment system characterised by deregulated labour markets, resulting in various forms of insecure work. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2011) defines precarious work as a strategy employers use to transfer risks and responsibilities onto workers. A precarious job is typified by uncertainties regarding employment duration, the potential for multiple employers, or an employment relationship that is disguised or ambiguous. Such jobs often entail low pay and substantial legal and practical obstacles to joining a trade union and engaging in collective bargaining (ILO, 2011, p. 5). Additionally, the ILO (2019) emphasises the necessity for substantial efforts from governments, employers, and workers to safeguard certain rights within this evolving system.

The focus on precarity appears more pronounced in Western Europe and highly industrialised post-World War II contexts. At the same time, the Global South has encountered precarity as a norm without using the same label. Nevertheless, discussions in the Global South acknowledge the relevance of precarity. Although not a new experience, a sense of post-Fordist nostalgia exists, longing not for a secure past but an unachievable future (see Muehlebach & Shoshan, 2012). Similar to Global South scholars who have embraced the concept of precarity (i.e., among others, Das & Randeria, 2015; Millar, 2014; Paret, 2016), we view precarity not as a fixed empirical entity but as a framework to understand how unstable work intersects with fragile life conditions and societal power relations in specific contexts.

In academic discourse, two fundamental elements of precarity are widely acknowledged. Firstly, scholars assert that the extensive adoption of precarious employment patterns within the dominant neoliberal labour market paradigm exposes specific demographic groups to exploitative and unpredictable work conditions (Bourdieu, 1998; Fantone, 2007). Broadening the scope beyond localised employment conditions, Lambert and Herod (2016) and Kalleberg et al. (2022) provide a contextual analysis of how the interplay between globalisation and national political reactions influences the proliferation of precarious employment. Their work illuminates the intricate interactions that have moulded labour market dynamics and the character of precarious employment.

Secondly, the concept of precarity extends beyond its representation solely within the labour market. It encompasses its multifaceted impact on various aspects of life, such as family dynamics, individual contexts, and social welfare provisions (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). It takes on the character of a broader existential condition—one in which the individual fundamental human condition becomes precarious (Allison, 2014; Lazzarato, 2004). Furthermore, Allison (2014) highlights multiple forms of precarity, encompassing work, social, and even life-and-death dimensions. This broader understanding aligns precarity with ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008) and is viewed as a pervasive facet of human existence in diverse contexts (Ettlinger, 2007). Similarly, Butler's (2004) perspective portrays widespread precarity as a consequence of oppressive governance in everyday situations and, more recently, as a response to varying exposure in the aftermath of violence and suffering rooted in socio-political contexts (see also Butler, 2009).

The link between precarity and capitalism is inherent on a global scale (see Barchiesi, 2012). Economic reforms, particularly privatisation and trade liberalisation since the 1970s, marked a shift towards neoliberal globalism and associated policies. Bangladesh transformed from an agrarian society to a neoliberal capitalist nation, with approximately 36% of its population now residing in urban areas (Hasan, 2022; Mondal, 2021). The government's divestment from various industries enabled the private sector, including foreign investors, to significantly shape the development of the garment industry. The RMG sector emerged as a pivotal player, making substantial contributions to export earnings and employment. The state adoption of neoliberal development policies, integrating local economies into global production networks, has resulted in differential treatment and regulation of specific populations, particularly garment factory workers in Bangladesh (Banerjee & Alamgir, 2019). While providing job opportunities for economically disadvantaged women, their circumstances illustrate the complex creation of precarity through influential actors in transnational supply chains across the Global South and North.

This article defines "hyper-precarious life" as an uncertain condition stemming from the interplay of various asymmetrical power dynamics shaped by the forces outlined above. It is marked by the absence of social protection mechanisms, a sense of disposability, and the inability to achieve a decent life for the self and family. We emphasise the need for a holistic comprehension of precarity. We contend that the state plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics between the market and the family, ultimately influencing the prevalence of class, gender, and ethnic disparities. A focus on female migrant workers' precarious lives in the RMG sector demonstrates that precarity is not a collection of isolated spheres; instead, different spheres collectively contribute to the construction of a precarious life.

We aim to illustrate the process of precarisation driven by global supply chains, government policies, factory owners, and socio-cultural dynamics, focusing on the day-to-day experiences of female workers in and outside RMG sector factories. This interconnected process profoundly impacts the everyday work, home, and social lives of female migrant workers, leading to their hyper-precarious existence. Adopting a feminist intersectional approach, we echo Butler (2004, 2009) to argue that precarious life is differentially constructed, with ethnic minority female workers in the RMG industry in Bangladesh facing heightened vulnerability to certain precarious conditions, such as racism and sexism, compared to their Bengali counterparts. Conversely, men in similar roles experience relatively more favourable circumstances. Marital status also contributes to differential experiences of precarity among unmarried, married, and single mother RMG workers. Our research highlights the importance of intersectionality in understanding workplace

inequalities, providing fresh perspectives on the interplay between various forms of inequality in professional settings. Additionally, it aids in comprehending how institutionalised regulations, norms, beliefs, values, and attitudes generate specific vulnerabilities often overlooked within work environments (De los Reyes & Mulinari, 2020).

4. The Global Supply Chain and Labour Precarity: Time, Wage, and Work Pressure

Anner (2020) explains how global trade regulations, technological advances, and financialisation have amplified power imbalances in the global supply chain, leading to two detrimental mechanisms for workers. The first, the "price squeeze," relates to price negotiations between buyers and suppliers. The second, the "sourcing squeeze," involves reduced lead times, altered order sizes, and last-minute changes to product specifications. These factors collectively result in increased work pressure, extended overtime, use of substandard (less safe) buildings, workplace bullying, and other adverse conditions, which we show in this section.

Bangladesh has continued to witness growth in its export figures, and factory owners have effectively competed with major apparel-producing nations like China, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, and Thailand by providing clothing products at a lower price than their competitors (Anner, 2020; Kabir et al., 2022, p. 546). This price squeeze and competition between apparel-producing countries stem from persistent power imbalances inherent in the global supply chain of the RMG industry, which heavily favour brands and retailers (Anner, 2019; Banerjee & Alamgir, 2019). This interview excerpt from an anonymous garment factory owner in our research reflects this power imbalance:

> Bangladesh has sustainable RMG factories, notably platinum-certified ones, but buyers do not pay $0.05 extra for their products. For example, a shirt that was $3.00 last year could be negotiated down to $2.80 this year. If not agreed, buyers go to cheaper factories. This mirrors our investment for competitiveness against China, Vietnam, and others.

In reaction to pricing pressures, garment producers make diverse adjustments, including modifications to fabric, trims, embellishments, labour costs, and local freight expenses to the port (Anner, 2020). On the factory floor, workers experience price squeeze through suppressed real wages and adverse effects on labour conditions (Anner, 2019; Kabir et al., 2022). Introducing the notion of a "pressure chain," Kabir et al. (2022) show that, ironically enough, the rise in the minimum wage in 2018 led to a further increase in workload, work pressure, mental stress, and unhealthy working conditions.

After the Rana Plaza disaster, internal market competition and the fear of boycotts or losing business to other countries pressured Bangladeshi garment producers into accepting lower product prices. For instance, there was a 13% decrease in prices, and delivery timelines were shortened by 8% (Witteman, 2018). Factory owners also increasingly embraced advanced technologies, with 47.37% of large enterprises and 25% of medium-sized enterprises incorporating automated machinery into their operations (CPD Bangladesh, 2018). As a mid-level factory manager explained during an interview just before the 2019 RMG minimum wage increase:

> Larger factories are replacing helpers with automated machines, primarily in response to the government's mandated minimum wage of 5,300 BDT post-Rana Plaza. This transition makes

> financial sense, as hiring a helper costs approximately 16,000 BDT in three months' wages, while investing in automated machinery yields a return on investment within the same period, ultimately generating profits.

Ironically, automation also intensifies the workload pressure on women, especially sewing machine operators, a profession dominated by females. Farida, an RMG worker with nine years of experience, left her village at the age of 13, progressed from a helper to an operator, married a co-worker, and now supports her children in the village by working in Dhaka. She lamented:

> I might quit the garment industry and return home. The workload has shot up. I used to make 120 pieces per hour, but now they want 200–250. We had 50 helpers for 150 machines, but new machines replaced them after the 2013 pay raise. Now, we work with materials straight from the cutting area, causing more pressure. When the factory raises pay by 100 takas, landlords increase rent by 300 takas. Food costs are rising too. How can we manage this overwhelming workload if we can't even afford proper meals?

Other participants also discussed a variety of negative consequences for workers following a minimum wage increase. These included reduced break times, heightened workloads, the imposition of additional production targets, and extended working hours. Workers like Farida employ diverse strategies to cope with their low wages, often making trade-offs between increased earnings and potential health risks. Laboni, 28, migrated to the city after eloping in the tenth grade. Despite aspiring for further education, she had to join a garment factory due to her husband's financial constraints. She recently transitioned from one factory to another, signifying a decline in the work environment. However, this move allowed her to increase her income to survive. The following interview excerpt sheds light on this aspect of daily survival and the financial challenges she and other workers are confronting:

> At my old factory, rules were good. We had weekends and government holidays off. Women got maternity leave and benefits along with childcare. But no chance for overtime. Living on such a low salary was tough. That's why I moved to my current factory with overtime facilities. But it's wrecking my health. Now I'm wondering, what's the point of more money if I can't stay healthy?

Farida's apprehension about increased workloads and insufficient pay hikes closely echoes the concerns of one of our research partners, a labour union activist. He is frustrated with the wage boards' failure to align pay raises with a living wage. Ultimately, the government prioritises business interests over the well-being of workers. In one of our conversations just before the recent pay rise, he raised a compelling question: Why does a worker in Bangladesh, producing the same product for a global fashion brand, earn only $70, whereas a counterpart in Colombia earns over $200 for identical work? His enquiry echoes the sentiments of the factory owner and mid-level manager, highlighting the intense competition to produce goods at the lowest cost while prioritising speed and efficiency. It underscores the benefits reaped by the upper tiers of the supply chain, often at the expense of meagre wages and the well-being of the most vulnerable workers at the bottom.

Generally, protests by RMG workers for regular salary and wage increases are met with violent suppression by the police (see also Akhter, 2023). The recent murder of trade unionist Shahidul Islam highlights the continuing oppressive conditions surrounding wage negotiations (Clean Clothes, 2023). Factory owners

have also consistently demonstrated a lack of accountability towards their workforce during crises like the recent pandemic and economic inflation (Bal et al., 2021a; Siddiqi, 2021).

In essence, raising wages might not significantly improve workers' living and working conditions. As this section demonstrates, the RMG industry is subjecting millions of workers to harsh conditions. Despite this, we found that women return to the RMG sector after exploring other employment opportunities. No single, uniform minimum wage applies to all workers in Bangladesh; instead, minimum wages are determined by various wage boards specific to different sectors and industries. Since other job opportunities often pay much less than RMG factories, workers prefer continuing or returning to RMG employment. Consequently, the RMG factory owners are not concerned about the well-being of workers or resolving disparities between living and minimum wages. A labour union activist called this an "abundant supply tragedy," with more labour than demand.

5. Health and Well-Being Impacted by Work

This section highlights how work precarity extends its impact to encompass issues such as nutrition, break times for meals and drinks, maternal health, and childcare arrangements. These factors profoundly influence the overall health and well-being of women workers in the RMG industry.

5.1. Factory Work and Women's Health

Research participants are torn between their work obligations and health needs. Our study uncovered instances illustrating the differential impact of wage disparities, general health issues, and extended working hours on male and female workers. Due to their social, cultural, and occupational circumstances, women encounter significant disadvantages when addressing these challenges. Many workers struggle with limited time for meals and staying hydrated. This problem goes beyond low wages and water consumption restrictions and pertains to the impracticality of accessing food on the work floor.

One participant highlighted the inconvenience of the canteen being situated on the sixth floor of another building, forcing workers to descend eight floors and climb six during lunch, significantly reducing their break time. Ethnic minority workers frequently endure derogatory remarks about their food during lunch. Despite the availability of safe drinking water, workers sometimes resort to drinking water from the restroom during short breaks before returning to hours of stitching:

> Drinking more water means frequent bathroom breaks, which negatively affects my productivity. Falling behind on production targets results in reprimands from supervisors. As a result, I only drink when I am extremely thirsty, leading to poor eating and drinking habits that contribute to factory-related health problems. (Jamila, age 23)

Factory rules, work schedules, and gender expectations complicate health, family planning, and childcare decisions. Women, facing long work hours with overtime, often resort to local pharmacies for healthcare, especially for contraception in the form of pills or injections, avoiding clinics due to their busy office hours. When they decide to go to health clinics, societal taboos lead many to skip work without explanation rather than seek permission from male supervisors for leave or passes, causing them to lose a day's pay.

Working conditions and the organisational structure significantly impact pregnant employees, especially since their work involves extended periods of sitting or standing. Research participants face discomfort when requesting restroom breaks from male supervisors, struggle with work-related pressures, and encounter obstacles in accessing maternity benefits due to various circumstances, all contributing to significant stress during pregnancy. All the participants in our study emphasised the overwhelming tension experienced during pregnancy, driven by the constant fear of losing their jobs and/or maternity leave and benefits. Take, for instance, Rahima's situation, a 19-year-old, second-generation garment worker whose mother migrated from a landless family in Rangpur district to work in the garment industry. Rahima found herself in a position where she had to work until eight months into her pregnancy to qualify for maternity benefits. However, her pregnancy-related complications prevented her from doing so, resulting in the premature birth of her child at seven months and the subsequent denial of half of her maternity leave and associated benefits. Sabina and her sister moved to Dhaka to join the RMG workforce after their parents lost land to riverbank erosion. Sabina postponed marriage for a decade to support her family and eventually married two years ago. Now, she is expecting her first child. She aptly expressed these concerns by saying: "If I fail to meet my production target due to pregnancy, I'll be asked to leave the job, a fate shared by other women."

Officially, garment factories provide four months of maternity leave, but our interviews revealed inconsistencies in its implementation. Many women reported receiving three months and twenty days of maternal leave (52 days before and 52 days after delivery). Variations existed in how different factories administered maternal benefits. For example, Laboni's factory did not provide the benefit in advance but instead after ten days of returning to work, possibly as a strategy to discourage women from changing factories after giving birth. Additionally, the distribution of maternal benefits was stretched over several months after resuming work, which often compelled women to continue working despite irregular salaries.

5.2. Balancing Work and Motherhood

Securing adequate childcare proved a significant challenge for many of our research participants. Despite the recent introduction of childcare facilities in some factories, these establishments often fall short of fully meeting the genuine needs of working mothers. Typically, these facilities only accept children as young as six months, while women are required to return to work 52 days after giving birth. This situation poses a dilemma for mothers who are reluctant to leave their breastfed infants at such a young age. Furthermore, these services are only offered to women who become pregnant six months after starting their jobs, and children older than three years are generally not accommodated. Factory managers often believe that women prefer to rely on village relatives for childcare, leading to a lack of investment in these services. Mothers also expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of care and safety concerns. The fear of accidents, such as the Rana Plaza incident, makes women hesitant to use factory facilities.

Beauty began working in the garment industry after her father's sudden death. Five years into her job, she married, had a son, and, two years later, briefly returned to her village to give birth to her second child, leaving the infant with her mother before resuming work. She expresses her apprehension aptly as follows:

> Leaving your child in childcare is the last resort for a woman. It's a choice made by those who lack parents or relatives to care for their child in the village or city, cannot afford to hire a maid, and, at

the same time, cannot afford to stop working. In such circumstances, they have no option but to use childcare services.

The shortage of childcare services in factories emphasises the crucial need for alternative arrangements, prompting many women to return to their rural areas during childbirth. Particularly, divorced women with children often leave them with their families in the village. When families lack support in their village, they usually opt to send their children to *madrasas*, religious schools that provide day-care services. This decision is driven by the comparatively shorter hours of public schools, typically ending at lunchtime, leaving children unsupervised during their mothers' working hours. Consequently, for those without access to family support in their village, enrolling their children in *madrasas* that offer day care becomes a practical solution.

In summary, the escalating time constraints, low wages, insufficient childcare facilities, and the heightened demand for increased workplace productivity place pressure on mothers. They must strive to secure an adequate income, ensure proper childcare, and maintain their families' overall health and well-being.

6. Socio-Cultural Power Dynamics and Gender Norms in and Beyond the Workplace

Previous sections examined the impact of low wages, workplace pressures, and an unwelcoming, non-inclusive work environment on women's health and financial well-being within and beyond the garment factory. Paid employment opportunities for rural, economically disadvantaged women in urban garment factories have far-reaching effects on gender relations. Research indicates that emphasising the transformative potential of women's workforce participation can overshadow gender norms influencing female RMG workers. These norms affect career choices, socio-economic advancement, wage negotiations, and union involvement, often directing women towards uncertain career paths associated with societal stigma. This section shows how socio-cultural norms and gender role expectations contribute to female workers' challenges in the global apparel supply chain. It centres on themes such as gender hierarchy in job roles, the impact of gender stereotypes on the division of labour, and surveillance systems monitoring women's conduct inside and outside factories.

6.1. Gender Disparity in Job Hierarchy and Socio-Economic Advancement

Once employed in an RMG factory, gender norms are crucial in shaping female workers' career prospects and upward mobility. While one might expect women to be promoted from sewing machine operators to supervisors after a few years of experience, the role of a supervisor requires a specific skill set and qualifications that may not align with prevailing cultural expectations for female individuals. Moreover, the supervisor's role, which does not involve operating sewing machines, demands higher education, proficiency in maths, and the ability to oversee and manage daily and hourly production targets. Supervisors generally employ stern language and communication methods to meet these targets. While a sewing machine operator typically remains seated at their designated workstation for eight hours, a supervisor must continuously move about, monitor multiple operators, and report to senior staff, who are often male. Consequently, socio-cultural norms are reinforced by workplace dynamics, leading many women to prefer remaining sewing machine operators even after a decade or more of work experience. One research participant shared that she had to transition from a supervisory role to that of an operator after her marriage. Her husband disapproved of her interacting with senior male colleagues and moving around the factory

floor. Supervisors, earning higher salaries than operators, are required to arrive at the factory earlier and leave later, after ensuring that all operators have completed their tasks and accounting duties. In addition to husbands' frequent disapproval of their wives working outside factory hours, women also expressed concerns about their safety on the quiet factory floor due to the risk of sexual harassment. Ethnic minority workers expressed significantly greater apprehension about this, not just within the factory premises but also during their commute to and from work. Moreover, such a schedule often proves impractical for women who are typically responsible for household chores.

The following conversation between Runa and one of our interlocutors illustrates how women view their work in the factories as temporary and not in line with their desired roles and responsibilities as wives and mothers:

> R: Will you switch factories for higher pay or a higher position after three years?
>
> P: No, not necessarily. I've been at X-factory for three years, and Eid is approaching. Switching would mean missing out on two Eid bonuses. I'm settled here and not keen on a higher position.
>
> R: Why not? After three years as an operator, wouldn't you want to become a supervisor?
>
> P: As a woman with a family, I might take a break from work for a year or two. So, a higher position doesn't seem worthwhile.

Ashraf, 42, assistant general manager and husband of a former RMG worker says:

> With my promotions, my salary increased, making it unnecessary for my wife to continue working. Had I allowed her to work, people might have commented, "look at him, he's now an assistant general manager, but he still has his wife working in the garment industry."

Ashraf's view reflects a complex interplay between personal choices, societal expectations, and perceptions of success within the context of marriage and professional advancement. The conversation excerpt and the subsequent quote with a worker's husband offer insight into the intricate dynamics of career, gender roles, and societal norms. Both quotes echo a prevalent sentiment among women and men in this study: that the preferred role for women is primarily within their households, fulfilling their primary roles as wives and mothers. Women typically resort to factory employment only when their situations demand it.

6.2. The Double Burden of Paid and Unpaid Labour

Female workers in the RMG sector also bear the burden of a double workload as they are disproportionately tasked with household work, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, in addition to their factory responsibilities (see also Ahmed, 2015; Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000). Borsha, a 19-year-old newly married garment worker who with the help of a neighbour migrated to escape verbal and emotional abuse from her stepmother, gives a vivid description of such work pressure:

> During peak seasons, my daily routine was quite demanding. I would rise at five in the morning, quickly shower, and prepare meals. With eight families sharing just two toilets, two showers, and a

> single kitchen equipped with multiple gas stoves, there were often long queues for access. I'd sometimes manage to eat, but more often than not, I would pack my lunch. Afterwards, I'd take a tempo [a ten-seater auto] to reach the factory by 8:00 am, working until 10:00 or 11:00 pm. I'd return home around midnight, prepare another meal, and eat by 2:00 am. My sleep was limited to three hours before I had to wake up and repeat this gruelling routine for several days.

Borsha often found herself cooking, allowing her husband more rest and longer sleep, as he firmly believed cooking was not his duty. When work pressures escalate, during peak seasons and shipment times, women are often required to take on night shifts and are denied their weekly day off (see also Ahmed, 2015).

6.3. "Good Women, Bad Women": Gendered Norms at Work and Beyond

Garment workers actively practice gender norms in their daily lives to preserve and institutionalise them. Our research findings closely align with what Bhaiya and Wieringa (2007) recognise as the continuous and steadfast reinforcement of the notion of "normalcy" through traditions, culture, the market, and the economy, both as separate components and in conjunction. For example, Balika, Sabina's younger sister introduced earlier, a 22-year-old unmarried garment worker, was asked about her village visits and interactions with married cousins. In anticipation of hearing an empowering perspective, her response was quite revealing. She shared: "I feel a sense of embarrassment. Although I visit my parents occasionally, I stay indoors and avoid engaging in social interactions with cousins my age." Balika's evident discomfort can be attributed to the perception of having surpassed the traditional marriageable age without finding a suitable life partner, highlighting the significant socio-cultural pressures she encounters.

Marriages between co-workers often lead to a shift in job positions, reflecting the need to conform to expected gender norms. This adjustment also hints at power imbalances within the home and the apprehension of potential workplace sexual harassment, as illustrated in Borsha's experience. Initially, Borsha was a "reporter," but her husband Imtiaz disapproved of her role in that section, where she had to provide daily production information to the general manager and production manager after regular working hours. Borsha mentioned: "The reporting section was not suitable. Different bosses have different mentalities. You never know what's on someone's mind." As a result, Borsha acquired sewing skills and transitioned to the sewing section.

Gender norms also prevail within factories, leading to the termination of employment for women who become pregnant outside of marriage. A female welfare officer at a garment factory shared a distressing incident involving a single (divorced) woman who became pregnant and suffered a miscarriage in the restroom. The welfare officer suspected that the woman was about five months pregnant and had possibly attempted to induce a miscarriage using medication, which had ultimately taken place at the factory. The woman wrapped the fetus in rags and disposed of it in the toilet. The next person to use the restroom could not flush it away, so a cleaner was called to retrieve the fetus. The factory management announced its intention to identify the person responsible. When nobody came forward, the management team reviewed the video footage and summoned all the women who had used the restroom during a certain period. Faced with the threat of involving the police, one lady admitted to the act, and the factory promptly terminated her employment. The welfare officer remarked: "No garment factory would retain someone with such a troubling history." The management team did not consider the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy or the reasons that led her to take such a measure.

7. Conclusion

By investigating the process of precarisation in Bangladesh's RMG industry, the article unites discussions of "precarious work" (i.e., Bourdieu, 1998; Kalleberg et al., 2022; Lambert & Herod, 2016) and "precarious life" (i.e., Allison, 2014; Butler, 2004, 2009) providing a holistic view of vulnerability's interconnected dynamics in both labour and broader social spheres. Throughout the article, we demonstrate that labour market precarity and precarious life factors such as gender, sexuality, and race are not distinct but rather exacerbate vulnerable and marginalised circumstances for workers. Through this comprehensive overview, the article also underscores the interconnected construction of precarity in various scales (local, national, transnational), transcending the conventional notion that precarious work in the Global South is contingent on local conditions. Although the RMG factories are predominantly situated in the Global South, the precarious nature of the industry is influenced by various factors originating from both the Global North and South.

We emphasise the complex connections between the worldwide supply chain, economic inequalities, social frameworks, and female garment workers' daily work and living conditions. The article first examines the intricacies of precarity in the global supply chain by emphasising the difficulties associated with time constraints, wage disparities, and the burdensome work pressures encountered by the most marginalised segments of the supply chain. Then, we detail how time, wage, and work pressure affect the health and overall well-being of female RMG workers. Lastly, we scrutinise the socio-cultural power dynamics prevailing in these individuals' workplace and daily life experiences. The article illuminates how these elements interweave and form a complex web of vulnerabilities for garment workers, especially women. Throughout the article, we demonstrate that precarity is not segmented into isolated spheres (i.e., work, social/family life, etc.), but emerges through the interconnectedness of various domains and power relations.

We employ the concept of hyper-precarity to describe the state of profound uncertainty arising from the interaction of disparate power dynamics. It is characterised by a lack of social protection mechanisms, a sense of disposability, and workers' inability to achieve a decent life for themselves and their families. Notably, the notion of hyper-precarity also highlights that precarity is deeply gendered and affects women disproportionately. An intersectional approach of hyper-precarity allows us to deepen our understanding of the multifaceted challenges female workers face in global supply chain-related inequality, through low wages, and via socio-cultural power dynamics. To comprehend the vulnerability of diverse groups, it is crucial to analyse different interconnected factors like gender, ethnicity, age, marital status, occupation, societal norms, and family dynamics.

The lived experiences of female RMG workers also underscore the nexus between precarity and neoliberalism. As elucidated in this article, a neoliberal global system of exploitation within the RMG supply chain is driven by profit-focused initiatives with limited accountability and transparency across the entire global supply chain, aided by the state's complicity. It is also crucial to consider the structural influence of capital, which denotes the ability of businesses and financial entities to shape government policies without exerting direct pressure (Gough, 2015). This cycle sustains a state of uncertainty and exploitation for the most vulnerable workforce at the lower echelons. Moreover, it underscores how global supply chain dynamics intensify socio-economic disparities, expanding our understanding of work precarity. Additionally, it highlights how these dynamics worsen socio-economic inequalities, affecting aspects like nutrition, maternal health, childcare, and time constraints for female RMG workers, significantly impacting their overall

well-being beyond the factory. Similar to Kalleberg et al.'s (2022) argument on precarious work in Asia, this article suggests that precarious work in Bangladesh, and potentially across other regions of the Global South, is influenced by the interaction of global and regional capitalist dynamics alongside the relationships between the state, businesses, society, and labour within the countries under study.

To conclude, we recommend further exploration of the relationships between ethnicity, migration, and precarity within and beyond the RMG sector, especially in the Global South, where this aspect has not been thoroughly investigated. While our study revealed a significant relationship between ethnicity and precarity, a detailed examination of this intersection within the RMG sector went beyond the scope of our research. Such an endeavour would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges that female migrant workers encounter.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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An Intersectional Analysis of Precarity and Exploitation: Women and LGBTQIA+ Workers in Substate Neoliberal Systems

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Abstract

The intersection of gender and ethnicity or race lies at the root of structural discrimination and racist practices for accessing the labor market and in the workplace. This discrimination is particularly evident for women and LGBTQIA+ individuals who either belong to ethnic minorities or are migrants. However, numerous other social drivers (e.g., age, class, origins) and external factors (e.g., prejudices, gender-based violence) further hinder their participation in the work domain and their attainment of fair labor conditions. This article explores how gender, ethnicity, and race intersect and operate with other conditions and factors to perpetuate the precarity and exploitation of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals who find themselves at the nexus of varied intersectional axes. The discussion centers around two neoliberal substate units in the Global North (South Tyrol, in Italy, and Catalonia, Spain) that register low unemployment rates and high rates of migration and that are home to historical, linguistic, and ethnic minorities. This empirical article provides for an informed debate on the lived experience of precarity and exploitation of women and LGBTQIA+ workers, and an analysis of how neoliberal substate units' labor and gender policies could be reformed.

Keywords

Catalonia; ethnicity; exploitation; gender; intersectionality; LGBTQIA+; precarity; race; social drivers; South Tyrol

1. Introduction

The neoliberal turn, the economic crises of recent decades, and the pandemic have made precarity and exploitation common among the majority of workers in the Global North and Global South. While employment rates in the official labor market tend to be higher in the former than the latter, the quality of

working conditions has overall significantly decreased (Jung et al., 2022; Rodriguez, 2022). Conditions worsen for those sectors of society that find themselves at the nexuses of intersectional axes of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, race, social class, disability, age, and more. Research has pointed to how precariousness becomes worse for women who already face horizontal and vertical segregation, the pay gap, the pension gap, and other interrelated dimensions of the gender employment gap (Chudnovsky & Reyes Millán, 2021; Jung et al., 2022; Koslowski, 2021). Migrants are usually confronted with racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring and are subject to exploitative labor practices (Lippens et al., 2022; Ortega-Jiménez et al., 2023; Rodriguez, 2022). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, gender diverse, and questioning (LGBTQIA+) individuals generally face remarkable difficulties in finding and securing a job and remain subject to gender and sexual hierarchies that expose them to discriminatory practices in the workplace (Badgett et al., 2021; Del Gobbo, 2023).

In addition, welfare states, which have recently reduced the scope of their services and benefits (Daly, 2020), continue to be constructed on premises such as racial capitalism, andrarchies, heteronormativity, and gender roles (Ciccia & Sainsbury, 2018; Rodriguez, 2022) that reinforce power asymmetries and exclusionary practices that ultimately affect the access of the abovementioned social categories to the job market and good work conditions. In this context, a need exists for intersectional analyses that go beyond single case studies of specific intersections to consider how other axes beyond gender, ethnicity, and race contribute to creating a critical matrix of social inequalities in the labor market (Ciccia & Sainsbury, 2018; Reiss et al., 2023).

This study adheres to the strand of intersectional research by reporting how a variety of social drivers (e.g., age, class, origins) and external factors (e.g., prejudices, gender-based violence) operate and eventually perpetuate the precarity and exploitation of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals. The study thus provides a voice to silenced minorities who live in economic systems that not only tolerate but also deepen inequalities and exclusion (Daly, 2020).

The discussion is situated in two neoliberal substate units in the Global North (South Tyrol, in Italy, and Catalonia, Spain) where gender, ethnicity, and race intersect daily in the work domain. South Tyrol and Catalonia are home to historical-linguistic minorities (Italians, German speakers, and Ladins in South Tyrol; Spaniards, Catalans, and Aranès speakers in Catalonia) whose linguistic rights are well accommodated. This variety has created multilingual environments that may require knowing more than one language to access the labor market. Simultaneously, both units are home to historical Roma and Sinti communities and more recent ones stemming from migration. Also, they register high rates of migration (Carlà, 2018). Their wealthy economies are largely based on tourism, agriculture, and services. While the third sector employs large parts of the middle-class population predominantly from the three historical linguistic groups, the other two sectors require many seasonal workers who are often recruited among those in weaker positions; that is, people with a migratory background, women, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Indeed, both units register high general employment rates and high rates for women (almost 70% in South Tyrol and 66% in Catalonia; ASTAT, 2023; GenCat, 2022). However, while statistics show a worrying gender pay gap among women (ASTAT, 2021), they do not explain why precarity and exploitation are persistent for women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially those with a migratory background. Finally, both units enjoy a high degree of self-government that includes competencies in labor and gender and have strong welfare systems. They have adopted several laws, policies, and action plans for labor and gender equality, but they lack an intersectional approach and are mainly based on gender binary assumptions.

In this article, I use gender, ethnicity, and race as socially constructed concepts that have a plethora of social implications. I use them as fluid and plural concepts rejecting essentialism and assuming further levels of diversity within them. In this sense, I align with poststructuralist/postmodern feminist and queer debates that refer to gender as a plural concept without binary boundaries (Richardson, 2020). I use ethnicity as an articulation of a linguistic community or territory (such as South Tyrol and Catalonia; Meer, 2014) and race as a social phenomenon that creates racial categories that deny equal dignity (Meer, 2014).

I refer to precarious work as "the presence of insufficient wages, absence or reduction of work benefits, insecurity in the duration of the employment relationship, the presence of several employers, and legal and practical obstacles to join a union and bargain collectively" (Chudnovsky & Reyes Millán, 2021, p. 626). Thus, precarity traps workers in uncertainty and produces complex dynamics at different levels (Walsh, 2019). Its etymology has colonial roots (Walsh, 2019). Indeed, it reproduces colonial effects with special regard to people with a migratory background who are subject to racialized dynamics of labor demand and relations of servility (Rodriguez, 2022).

Finally, I refer to exploitation following the International Labour Organization's indicators related to working excessive days or hours, carrying out hazardous work, receiving low or no salary, suffering wage manipulation, working in terrible conditions, and having no entitlement to social protection, in addition to there being no respect for labor laws or the signed contract (International Labour Organization, n.d.).

Hence, the following sections, after an overview of recent debates and methodology, delve into the lived experiences of precarity and exploitation of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Tyrol and Catalonia and discuss how these neoliberal substate units' labor and gender policies could be reformed.

2. Recent Debates on Precarity, Exploitation, and Intersectionality

This article situates its discussion in three research fields that have received wide academic attention, and, by extension, are not exempt from ongoing debates. Focusing on Europe, research now understands precarity as a result of neoliberalism and the deregulation of labor markets (Walsh, 2019). This cannot be separated from the scientific analysis of exploitation, which recent literature also has identified as a structural element of the current neoliberal (and deregulated) capitalist systems (Mantouvalou, 2018; Palumbo, 2023). A recent debate tries to move beyond the narrow conceptualization of exploitation, especially at the legal level (Mantouvalou, 2018), and sees it rather as a continuum of varying degrees of unfair labor conditions, including cases in which workers accept such conditions due to precarity and compelling economic needs (Palumbo, 2023). This holds particularly true for those who find themselves at the nexus of several intersecting axes of discrimination such as the women and LGBTQIA+ individuals discussed in this article. Indeed, as Palumbo (2023) stressed, there is a need to capture the diverse subjective and contextual elements of exploitation that, in turn, require intersectional analysis.

In Europe, the studies on intersectionality, championed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), have mainly developed around social inequality, identity, power and resistance, and religious diversity. Several academics have tackled the intersection of the so-called Big Three (gender, race, and class) but mostly concerning women and migration and taking little consideration of other factors (Davis & Zarkov, 2017). Likewise, scholarly works on the working conditions of LGBTQIA+ individuals have been steadily increasing. The intersection

with age, health, and migration has received attention in the context of the United States (e.g., Badgett et al., 2021), but less so in Europe.

In this frame, this article seeks to contribute to these recent debates by looking at the lived experiences of precarity and exploitation as part of the prism of social inequalities dictated by two substate capitalist and welfare systems in which parts of our societies risk remaining marginalized due to the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity but also many other drivers and factors. In addition, the article adheres to Hancock's (2019, p. 118) recent "paradigm intersectionality approach" to empirically analyze the complex causalities of specific social inequalities and, at the same time, suggest ideas to transform the legal institutions.

3. Methodology

This article reports part of the research of a larger project that investigates the socioeconomic participation (access to work, education, and social and public services) of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Tyrol and Catalonia. Thus, it has followed the project's socio-legal qualitative methodology (Tomaselli, 2022). The article combines the social sciences' interpretive analysis of individual perceptions (Robson & McCartan, 2016) with the assessment of the implementation and application of legal instruments (Dobinson & Johns, 2014). It thus assesses the results of the analysis of two datasets: primary data stemming from empirical work with civil society organizations (CSOs) and policy experts, and secondary data comprising South Tyrolean and Catalan laws, policies, and action plans in the fields of labor, gender and cultural diversity, equal opportunities, antidiscrimination, and social inclusion.

To collect primary data, I employed one main qualitative research technique: semi-structured interviews. I used a purposive sampling strategy combining quota and snowball sampling (Robson & McCartan, 2016). I aimed to reach out to participants in relative proportions in both substate units and their provinces (Bolzano in South Tyrol; Barcelona, Girona, Lleida/Lerida, and Tarragona in Catalonia). Other participants were subsequently recommended by the first respondents. Results are thus not representative but are indicative of what happens on the ground.

The interviewees were identified based on web and social media searches in South Tyrol and Catalonia. I looked for CSOs dealing with women and LGBTQIA+ rights, awareness raising, and advocacy or providing them assistance in the fields of work, education, services, and other sectors (e.g., gender-based violence). I decided not to work exclusively with trade unions or workers' or employers' associations, not only because of the wider breadth of the project, but also because they tend to know less about LGBTQIA+ and migrant workers and their labor experiences than the CSOs that provide them assistance. Indeed, these CSOs ensure more anonymity and safety to the individuals they assist and usually know more about their situations.

Hence, I identified 29 CSOs in South Tyrol and 111 in Catalonia. This asymmetry is due to the size of the population of these two subnational units: Catalonia has four provinces and is approximately 14 times the population of South Tyrol. Out of these identified CSOs, I selected and invited for either an individual or group interview 26 CSOs in South Tyrol and 82 in Catalonia. I had to invite a high number of CSOs in Catalonia because many never replied or refused to be interviewed. For both South Tyrol and Catalonia, the selection of the CSOs followed these criteria: balance between those formed and run by women and those formed and run by LGBTQIA+ individuals; balance between those addressing local women and LGBTQIA+ individuals

(including, Roma and Sinti) and those targeting mainly women and LGBTQIA+ individuals with a migratory background. Also, for Catalonia, I had additional criteria to reach a proportional ratio for each province: size of the population of each province; number of CSOs that were found in each province; and balance among those dealing with the whole LGBTQIA+ spectrum and those having a specific target, for example, lesbian, transsexual, or asexual individuals only. Moreover, for Barcelona, which, in itself, had the vast majority of identified CSOs, I added an additional criterion that concerned the sector in which the CSOs were acting (e.g., employment, health, youth, families, education). Those CSOs that were eventually excluded from the sample were those that were mainly dealing with cultural issues, those without a physical seat, or those having very few and/or unreliable contact details (e.g., only a generic email address).

I eventually carried out 16 individual or group semi-structured interviews (13 individual and three group interviews) with participants either employed with or volunteering for the identified CSOs in South Tyrol, and 27 in Catalonia (21 individual and six group interviews). Out of the latter, 11 CSOs are working in Barcelona and its province, seven in Tarragona and its province, three in Lleida/Lerida and its province, three in Girona and its province, and three (albeit with a seat in Barcelona) in the whole of Catalonia. In two cases (one in Barcelona and one in South Tyrol), I held two separate interviews with participants working or volunteering in the same CSOs upon their request. All the interviewees reported the lived experiences of the people they assisted.

A large majority of the CSOs that I interviewed are acting or conducting their activities in urban areas, while many work in both rural and urban areas, and only a few focus on rural areas. The majority of the interviewed CSOs receive public funds, at least partially, while some are based on voluntary work only (for further details see Tomaselli, 2023a; see also Table 1 below).

Regarding the identification of policy experts, I used non-probability (or purposive) sampling strategies and quota and snowball sampling (Robson & McCartan, 2016, pp. 279–280). Hence, I carried out a web-based search to identify those Catalan and South Tyrolean public administration bodies that are in charge of protecting and promoting gender and cultural diversity, equal opportunities, antidiscrimination, and social inclusion policies at the substate level. The scope included reaching out to a variety of policy experts who have occupied or continue to occupy key positions in public administration bodies in charge of the abovementioned sectors and policies at the regional level in Catalonia and at the provincial and municipal level in South Tyrol. This asymmetry is due to the fact that, in Catalonia, the competence to deal with gender, diversity, and social inclusion is of the Generalitat de Catalunya at the country level, while in South Tyrol it is dealt with both at the provincial and municipal levels. The snowball sampling allowed me to identify a few more potential participants. I eventually identified 18 policy experts in South Tyrol and eight in Catalonia. This asymmetry, as mentioned, is due to the need to include municipalities in the former substate unit. Out of these policy experts, I selected and invited for an interview 13 in South Tyrol and all eight in Catalonia. Among the former, there were six experts from the four main municipalities and seven from the provincial level. The latter were all current or former civil servants of the Generalitat de Catalunya in the abovementioned sectors. The policy experts that were eventually excluded from the sample in South Tyrol were those that were mainly dealing with education or minors' issues and thus could not contribute regarding issues related to the domains of work and public services. See Table 1 for further details.

Table 1. Number of identified, invited, and interviewed CSOs and policy experts per substate unit.

Participants	South Tyrol	Catalonia
Identified CSOs	29	111
Invited CSOs	26	82
CSOs interviewed	16	27
Total CSOs interviewed	43	
Identified policy-experts	19	8
Invited policy-experts	13	8
Policy-experts interviewed	7	3
Total policy-experts interviewed	10	

The interview guides for CSOs included questions on access to the labor market, episodes of discrimination at the workplace, and the role of additional social drivers (personal conditions, e.g., age, class) and external factors (e.g., prejudices, gender-based violence). The guides for interviewing the policy experts focused on role, application, pros and cons, and the potential need for reform of the abovementioned local laws, policies, and action plans (see Table 2).

Interviews were held between June 2022 and March 2023 in four languages (Catalan, Italian, German, and Spanish). Then, the interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed through Nvivo software. I assigned codes by following a deductive but open approach (Creswell, 2012) based on the interview guides. However, I also included additional codes when specific issues were recurrently mentioned by respondents (e.g., transphobia).

I followed the "intercategorical" approach of intersectional analysis McCall (2005) identified, which allows one to not only critically separate social categories, but also explore the inequalities that exist between and across them and make comparisons. Therefore, for the thematic analysis of the CSOs' interviews, I categorized the codes according to four socially constructed categories: local women, local LGBTQIA+ individuals, women with a migratory background, and LGBTQIA+ individuals with a migratory background. Roma and Sinti women and LGBTQIA+ individuals were included in either local or with a migratory background.

"Local" describes women and LGBTQIA+ citizens of South Tyrol or Catalonia. "With a migratory background" refers to those who had recently migrated into these units, had previously had a nationality different from Italian or Spanish, and/or had one of their parents previously enter South Tyrol or Catalonia as a migrant (European Commission, n.d.). This third case concerns the "second generation."

All respondents received an information sheet with details regarding the research purposes and the protection of their personal data and data of special categories following the EU Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR). I collected explicit consent to participate voluntarily in the research. Respondents' personal data have been encrypted and pseudonymized with numerical codes for personal security reasons. Hence, the names of respondents are not disclosed. I have duly applied my institution's ethical principles and ensured integrity and transparency. During fieldwork, I was also conscious of my positionality and of potential power asymmetries with my respondents, being myself a white, middle-class, female researcher who had grown up in a Western reality. Moreover, given the sensitivity of the research topics

(e.g., gender, ethnicity, race), I maintained a humble and respectful attitude. I also switched to the language the interviewee preferred.

I used a non-probability sampling strategy and a sample size target for selecting the secondary data shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Type and number of policies analyzed per substate unit.

Laws and policies	South Tyrol	Catalonia
Country or regional statute	1	1
Law(s) on equal opportunities between women and men	4	3
Law(s) on LGBTQIA+ rights	0	1
Law(s) on migration and integration	1	1
Law(s) on gender-based violence	1	1
Law(s) on disability	1	1
Provincial policies and action plans on equal opportunities and social inclusion	3	(country-level policies only) 5
Municipal policies and action plans on equal opportunities and social inclusion	2	
Local recovery plans (NextGenerationEU)	1	1
Total laws and policies	14	14

I performed content analysis on these data. First, I familiarized myself with them. Second, I created categories for analysis and codes and tested them to assess reliability. Third, I performed the analysis counting the frequency of the codes (units) that referred to the main social drivers and external factors identified in the abovementioned thematic analysis. This led to the identification of gaps in the local laws, policies, and action plans as reported in section 5.

4. Lived Experiences of Precarity and Exploitation in South Tyrol and Catalonia

Precarity is a frequent condition for local women and LGBTQIA+ individuals in both substate units. It becomes a systematic reality that correlates with exploitation for those with a migratory background.

In this section, I present tables based on the "matrix coding query" feature of NVivo that helps visualize the intersections between lists of codes and thus, for the purpose of this article, show how gender, ethnicity, and/or race intersect and operate with the abovementioned social drivers and external factors. I report also various excerpts from interviews to illustrate how these conditions and factors create critical matrixes that reinforce the conditions of precarity and cause episodes of labor exploitation.

Table 3 shows that interviewees identified sexism, the need for work–life balance and family reconciliation, and division of roles as the main three drivers that not only affect local women's entry into the labor market but also the conditions necessary for them to remain active workers or access higher positions. As one interviewee put it:

> There is this glass ceiling, that is not made of glass, is of reinforced concrete, that makes that women are not promoted. (CSO interview 4)

Indeed, these three drivers are intertwined with gender-based prejudices and stereotypes and mutually reinforce each other thereby creating a critical matrix of domination and oppression vis-à-vis local women that ultimately hinder them from, not only entering the labor market, but also opposing conditions of work precarity and/or exploitation. This domination-oppression matrix is further exacerbated when other drivers such as age, class, and agency intersect. This situation holds particularly true for older and younger women, those coming from poorer sectors of society, or those who have less agency (i.e., self-esteem, autonomy, and ability to act). When these factors combine, women find themselves at the nexus of manifold intersectional forces that repress their attempts to enter the labor market. For instance, women who dedicate most of their life to family care due to the supposed division of family roles—a condition dictated by imposed and interiorized sexism and gender-based stereotypes and prejudices—face impressive difficulties when entering the labor market, especially after a divorce, compounded by the resulting digital gap they frequently have after so long out of the workforce. As one interviewee summarized:

> Yes, they [local women] had children and decided that the husband worked, and she took care of the kids. After twenty years, they divorce, and so she is 45–50 years old and has nothing….Moreover, they [local women] have a digital gap because now work conditions have changed…and I see many discriminations because you [woman] are young and have no experience and then perhaps will have children or you are too old, have experience but have children, and then will stay at home with them if they get ill…then there are vacations, you will be absent…like the father [are] unable to do anything. (CSO interview 5)

Another critical example of how the need for work–life balance and family reconciliation, age, and class form a dangerous intersectional matrix of inequality is when a woman is a victim of gender-based violence. She usually needs to relocate and find a new job for security reasons, and she typically takes her child(ren) with her. She thus becomes the sole caregiver, which further hinders her availability to find and secure a job:

> Finding a job for these women [victims of gender-based violence] has always been a problem, in the sense that, they have children, right? How can they manage [the childcare] with a job that is often low-skilled? Because women feel they must work. But what are the types of jobs you find more quickly? Those low-skilled that economically do not allow you to live [decently]. (CSO interview 15)

Finally, antigypsyism vis-à-vis Roma and Sinti women, besides being a systematic form of discrimination, becomes a vector to constantly confine them at the intersection of gender and ethnicity, and, thus, to perennial precarity in the labor market. It forces them to opt for informal jobs that are not regulated or stable, which, in turn, leads to episodes of exploitation:

> They [Roma and Sinti women] find a job. For instance, at McDonald's or places like that, in big restaurants, where they are heavily exploited….Then they do not stand this treatment…and give up…so precarity…they just earn something for a month or two….Others would stay but cannot do it….[It] is attributed to them if something is missing [and they are fired]. (CSO interview 36)

Table 3. Main factors affecting local women based on NVivo matrixes.

Factors	Access to work	Issues in the workplace	Total
Sexism	31	37	68
Family reconciliation	25	30	55
Family roles' division	26	27	53
Age	36	15	51
Gender-based violence	31	14	45
Antigypsyism	33	8	41
Class	32	8	40
Prejudices/stereotypes	19	20	39
Agency	31	6	37

As reported in Table 4 below, women with a migratory background face racism or are victims of other prejudices, often interlinked with their different origins and their lack of language knowledge. In their case, how the intersection of race and gender oppresses their just access to jobs, as is sadly and widely known, is even more self-evident. However, in the case of South Tyrol and Catalonia, this is further compounded by the need to speak multiple languages to find and secure a stable position. Indeed, those who are not proficient in the idioms spoken in these two multilingual substates are preferred by employers because they cannot claim their labor rights and are thus more easily exploited. Also, women's origins can create another intersectional axis that affects their possibility to negotiate better working conditions. As exemplified by one interviewee:

> It has changed from…the…South American [women], and to the Central Americans. Afterward from Central America, they may have moved on to the Philippines and then to Africans. And currently there are people, women who are African. Why?…They don't complain…they have another language….Normally they speak English or French. But [are] not [valued] in a positive way like, "she is going to communicate with the customers." No. If you speak English or speak French, or the language you speak, or don't know Spanish, because most people don't know it, the better it is. And even better if she is a single mother or a woman who keeps her children away [in the country of origin] and has to send money [remittances]. This is the profile they are looking for now. And they look for it and find it, of course….These women do not realize [it]. They don't know anything about labor rights, what they should be earning….They do not understand….Companies are becoming more and more abusive….Work has been dehumanized. (CSO interview 8)

Another example of how race, gender, and origins—and the intertwined prejudices and racism based on how they are perceived by employers—create a complex system of oppression that excludes women with a migration background from fair labor conditions is illustrated by this interviewee:

> In the fruit sector, there are many violations due to origin, skin color, religious orientation, linked to the fact of being a woman….In the case of women who work in fruit storages, in general, the contract agreement is complied with because they receive the salary set by the agreement. Generally. This does not mean that they [the employers] will not end up paying it….They don't pay the extra hours…and there are cases where they [the women] even do double shifts, although it's prohibited. Because they work six

> days a week with double shifts, that's sixteen hours a day, in some cases….Positions of responsibility often go to men, even if the majority are women….Then comes what I told you about—skin colors. Women from sub-Saharan Africa occupy the lowest positions, as do Arab women. And then, the most responsible positions are held by women who come from Eastern Europe, mainly Romania or Bulgaria. And the coordinators or store managers are always men….But they are not sub-Saharan….They are men from Eastern Europe or they are Catalan….They are "whitey." (CSO interview 4)

As for local women, another intersectional force may be gender-based violence. However, women with a migratory background face an additional burden due to the lack of family or other type of support. The need to reconcile work duties and family commitments is also crucial. Women with a migratory background are often judged based on sexism regarding their cultures and working capacities. Hence, when gender, race, sexism, and prejudices in their case all intersect with work–life balance, they are forced to accept precarity and exploitation:

> Then, well, the fact of also being a migrant woman and then being a black migrant woman also…you are still considered….Either you are poor, or you don't have a high intellectual level….Sixty, seventy percent of women caregivers…are migrant women, in an irregular situation. Many are living situations of modern slavery, working twenty-four hours a day…without being able to go out, without being able to have hours of rest, without having days off….And then you, in your situation of vulnerability, have no other option than to accept the job and try to survive. (CSO interview 26)

Finally, "second-generation" women, who have typically surpassed linguistic and cultural barriers since they grew up in the two substates, tend to find themselves at the nexus of other intersectional drivers. Gender and race remain key but are compounded with anti-Arab prejudices based on their perceived appearance:

> Muslim women who wear the veil continually report the fact that they are unable to access certain jobs due to discrimination, let's say in relation to the fact that they wear the veil. (CSO interview 6)

Table 4. Main factors affecting women with a migratory background based on NVivo matrixes.

Factors	Second generation	Access to work	Issues in the workplace	Total
Prejudices/racism	12	38	27	77
Languages	6	53	10	69
Gender-based violence	8	42	9	59
Origins	9	30	15	54
Agency	4	33	9	46
Sexism	3	27	14	44
Labor exploitations	0	18	25	43
Family reconciliation	0	31	10	41
Appearance	10	17	10	37

In accordance with the respondents (Table 5 below), local LGBTQIA+ individuals are often victims of direct or indirect discrimination, especially in the workplace. When they are not victims of direct discrimination, they are subject to microaggressions that materialize in derision or jokes, and they may face vertical

segregation. Hence, in their case, a crucial intersection is the nexus of gender and gender-based prejudices and stereotypes based on the imperative of heteronormativity, and the assumptions based on their appearance. As one interviewee observed:

> Well, despite it [being] better lately, the problems are always the same….It is about subtle things…comments, jokes….They tell them without thinking because they are well rooted in their minds…and you would say this occurs with elder colleagues. But we see it also with young ones….In the public administration salaries are regulated…but yes, promoting [to higher position] is more difficult….There is the notorious glass ceiling. (CSO interview 25)

In the case of trans people, the gender-heteronormativity matrix becomes even more oppressive due to frequent episodes of transphobia. As explained by these two interviewees:

> Trans people…remain the most fragile group….What we notice is that discrimination is more likely to occur, so to speak, in not having the job, so in that phase of the interview….And then we have the whole problem of segregation and many work…[as] shop assistants, hairdressers, clerks…the whole world of catering, especially fast food….They struggle to access different jobs. (CSO interview 1)

> The T of trans people, inside the LGTBIAQ+…: They are having more problems, more questions, more discussions….We have addressed certain problems that [involve] trans coworkers….Problems with fellow workers, work teams; the no acceptance of having a trans colleague….[When someone decides], in a given moment, to start the entire [transitioning] process. Well, there is a lot to fight [for], [a lot to] demonstrate, [for example:] take care of the medical service, explain to the bosses or take holidays so as not to have to explain a lot of things. Then, when you reincorporate yourself and have all your steps….Well, your colleagues were used to knowing you with one identity and now, once back, they know you with another. That you are the same person…but…here's where there are problems. (CSO interview 25)

Table 5. Main factors affecting local LGBTQIA+ individuals based on NVivo matrixes.

Factors	Access to work	Issues in the workplace	Focus on trans people	Total
Prejudices/stereotypes	17	35	10	62
Heteronormativity	9	23	9	41
Appearance	12	4	10	26
Transphobia	5	5	10	20
Health issues	9	9	2	20
Age	11	3	5	19
Languages	12	0	5	17

Employers prefer not to hire people who do not have a normative body or appearance. When they do, it is because of legal obligations or fiscal benefits, and the contract is normally not renewed. In addition, LGBTQIA+ individuals' age and knowledge of languages become critical drivers. Therefore, heteronormativity also may couple with the intersectional axis of age and exacerbate the precarious access some LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially trans people, may have in the labor market, as this interviewee explained:

> Being present in the business world has not been translated, I believe, into a concrete policy…[apart] from the public administration….They have created a very specific program to help businesses hire trans people….But, obviously, the problem with adopting this as a public aid is that, in the end, it is something temporal….Age always is crucial…especially in those working environments that are more open to hire people from the [LGBTQIA+] community, like fashion, and age can influence negatively. Because we always face this of the [hetero]normativity. (CSO interview 2)

Data regarding LGBTQIA+ individuals with a migratory background (Table 6 below) are less robust than the other categories. In their case, respondents reported that being undocumented allows the proliferation of labor exploitation. This factor intertwines with the language gap that then makes these individuals unable to exercise their rights:

> Because being trans, then speaking two languages, increases your probability of finding work, however, eh, let's say, it depends on who you are, it depends on what documents you have, being trans and Italian is one thing, if you are trans and migrated it's another thing….The trans identity is more burdensome. (CSO interview 1)

They are also subject to episodes of racism and other incorrect assumptions and fixed ideas (prejudices) that are often interlinked with imagined ideas around their gender and origins. Finally, class and age are among those personal conditions that expose these individuals, especially those who are transgendered, to increased precarity:

> And the work in the agriculture [sector]…is very precarious….[LGBTQIA+] migrant people who come to our job placement service, because they arrive and have no way to earn a living….We have a big problem here…if people come with a [request for] asylum or people with work permits, we can help a little, but we have many cases of migrants who have arrived in the country illegally, let's say. And they are here irregularly….And we can't help them much beyond being able to recommend them: "Look, what can you do, do you speak English? Well, you could give English classes and get paid in black. Or you could give dance lessons." (CSO interview 3)

Therefore, LGBTQIA+ individuals with a migratory background who find themselves at the intersection of gender, race, age, class, and level of education are confined in a system of oppression that is ruled by their legal status, which, if illegal or unclear, forces them to opt for incessant precarity.

Table 6. Main factors affecting LGBTQIA+ individuals with a migratory background based on NVivo matrixes.

Factors	Access to work	Issues in the workplace	Focus on trans people	Total
Legal status	7	2	7	16
Languages	7	1	2	10
Origins	9	0	0	9
Prejudices/racism	7	0	2	9
Class	2	1	5	8
Age	4	0	2	6
Legal status	7	2	7	16

5. The Role of Substate Instruments

The thematic analysis of the interviews with policy experts points to positive and negative aspects of the current labor and gender laws, policies, and action plans. On the one hand, the policy experts reported that South Tyrolean and Catalan substate instruments have the potential to become effective tools to enhance access to the labor market for local women and LGBTQIA+ individuals and those with a migratory background. This potential is particularly true for the South Tyrolean provincial law against mobbing and the Catalan policy on equal treatment within companies, for example. On the other hand, the experts have also identified a general lack of implementation. This nonperformance is mainly due to a lack of economic and/or personnel resources and a lack of commitment by the institutions or other executing bodies:

> The law has remained halfway in its development because it has had neither enough financial resources nor enough human resources nor enough operational structure to deploy. And that there has not been enough commitment from public institutions to be able to carry out this development. (Policy expert interview 10)

The situation is further exacerbated by a lack of interdepartmental cooperation or competition. Other areas of local intervention (e.g., traffic and mobility) tend to be prioritized, especially when an action is tangible and visible. This prioritization is intertwined with other local political goals that aim to secure votes for the next elections:

> It is evident that certain working groups that have been created in this last period seem more aimed at political propaganda rather than at the real resolution of the problem. (Policy expert interview 4)

A lack of monitoring and evaluation phases further hinders the effectiveness of the local instruments, in both the public and private sectors. A need exists not only for a sanction scheme, but also for a mediation system that can trigger education and reflection on how gender, ethnicity, race, and other factors (e.g., prejudices and stereotypes) intersect and eventually operate, even at the subconscious level:

> There should be an ad hoc sanctioning regulation…[but] we have seen many times that an economic sanction is not effective…incorporating mediation, reparation, and pedagogy would be very important an improvement. (Policy expert interview 3)

Bodies in charge of executing the laws and policies are generally formed by members from the middle-class and "white" sectors who tend to have a rather conformist view. The policy experts, although some do belong to the aforementioned sectors, reckon that a mixed composition at managerial and staff levels would be highly beneficial to enhance the applicability and effectiveness of the various measures:

> In its composition there is a lack of representation, for example…about migrant women…[and] everything that is the LGBT world…so this is a bit of an element of distortion…[and the law] was a collective effort that gave its result. We obviously would have wanted more and better. (Policy expert interview 5)

Well-trained, well-organized, well-financed offices that are located more locally and in close(r) cooperation with CSOs would also ensure more efficacy in the implementation of laws, policies, and action plans. Local

data on gender and ethnicity, and/or race, are sparingly produced and are used even less to apply or reform the existing instruments, whose current formulation is conventional and ignores intersecting axes. This lack of data is a gap that is present also at the European level. For instance, only the Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2023) has indicators of intersectional inequalities regarding five social conditions (family type, age groups, education level, birth country, and disability), but it remains trapped in a binary conception.

The content analysis of the secondary data (South Tyrolean and Catalan laws, policies, and action plans in the fields of labor, gender, cultural diversity, equal opportunities, antidiscrimination, and social inclusion) also confirmed the lack of an intersectional approach. These instruments have been designed and are currently applied as if the matters they regulate were stand-alone and unconnected. For instance, the roles of class and agency are ignored. This disjunction implies that the equal opportunities actions or disability laws do not take into consideration how class can hinder women's access to work. Only a few instruments cite intersectionality and its importance (i.e., the action plan of the South Tyrolean municipality of Meran), but they still fail to consider how different axes can intersect and thereby create a matrix of inequality that hinders women's employment. Age finds some recognition in the South Tyrolean equal opportunities and social plans, but none in the Catalan laws and policies, and neither recognize LGBTQIA+ individuals. And vice versa, Catalan instruments tackle racism in at least 6 of the 14 analyzed instruments, while in South Tyrol, this is barely considered (see further in Tomaselli, 2023b).

6. Conclusion

This article has reported the empirical and exploratory results on how gender, ethnicity, race, and other social drivers (e.g., age, class, origins) and external factors (e.g., prejudices, gender-based violence) perpetuate precarity and exploitation for women and LGBTQIA+ individuals through an intersectional lens.

This discussion was situated in South Tyrol (Italy) and Catalonia (Spain) in the frame of a larger project on women and LGBTQIA+ socioeconomic participation. These substate units enjoy high degrees of self-government and wealthy economies and are home to historical-linguistic minorities, including Roma-Sinti communities, and a high proportion of the population has a migratory background. Their local economic systems are neoliberal with strong welfare systems but also strong patriarchal roots. Hence, as reported by interviews with CSOs and policy experts, they tend to reproduce what Ciccia and Sainsbury (2018) and Rodriguez (2022) identified as key elements of these systems: racial capitalism, andrarchies, heteronormativity, and gender roles.

These elements eventually worsen the precariousness of women and LGBTQIA+ workers and create favorable conditions for exploitation. Indeed, local women are trapped in their gender roles, sexism, and the work–life balance that keeps them in precarious positions. This is also true for women with a migratory background, who also face episodes of racism and are often exploited without the possibility of speaking up. Furthermore, it is often overlooked that these situations are exacerbated when these women are victims of gender-based violence. Overall, (cis) men are preferred, creating and recreating andrarchies. Heteronormativity affects the hiring of both local LGBTQIA+ individuals and those with a migratory background and causes discrimination in the workplace. When migratory individuals are undocumented, they are easily exploited. This exploitation is particularly evident for trans people.

Policy-wise, both units have a high level of, albeit not exclusive, powers on labor and gender and their local laws, policies, and action plans do have potential, for instance, to combat gender-based mobbing and promote equal treatment within companies. However, they are ineffectively implemented due to inadequate economic and/or personnel resources and commitment. This is exacerbated by poor interdepartmental cooperation and competition. The units also would need a sanction system that, besides requiring an economic fine, would prompt mediation and gender, ethnic, and race education and reflection. Finally, the substate units would benefit from using more data and, most importantly, by adopting a comprehensive intersectional approach (i.e., with more drivers and factors).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All data related to this article are available in the dedicated Zenodo community The Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity in South Tyrol and Catalonia: A Comparative Perspective on the Socioeconomic Participation of Women and LGBTIAQ+ Individuals at: https://zenodo.org/communities/ingepastproject

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