



I-CLAIM

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe

Immigration Status and Labour Conditions: Migrant workers in Agriculture, Delivery and Logistics, and Domestic and Care Work in Europe

Sector report

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January 2026



Funded by
the European Union



UK Research
and Innovation

Funded by the European Union under Grant Number 101094373.
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Executive Summary

This comparative report analyses the living and working conditions of migrants with insecure residence status (hereafter referred to as irregularised migrants) in three major European labour-market sectors—agriculture, domestic work, and delivery—across six countries: Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Drawing on 244 interviews with migrant workers, complemented by expert and stakeholder perspectives, the report examines how irregularity is produced and managed through the interaction of migration, labour, and welfare systems (see Sigona & van Liempt 2025).

Across the cases, irregularised migrants occupy positions that are essential yet marginal within national economies. They are concentrated in activities characterised by informality, high turnover, and subcontracting. Irregularity operates simultaneously as a legal condition and as a labour relation, converting dependence and limited rights into economic flexibility and cost efficiency. **Agriculture** illustrates how seasonal and circular migration regimes sustain forms of dependency and informalisation. Workers from Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Asia often rely on recruiters or intermediaries who mediate access to jobs, accommodation, and transport. Long hours, insecure and uneven pay, and inadequate housing are recurrent features. Gendered divisions of labour persist, with women concentrated in manual or lower-paid tasks and facing particular risks of isolation and abuse in live-in or remote settings.

In **domestic work**, migrants—predominantly women—provide indispensable household and personal care across Europe’s ageing societies. Employment arrangements often blur the boundaries between work and family, producing strong emotional and social dependency. Many workers alternate between periods of regularity and irregularity as residence, employment, and family rights remain tightly linked. The intimate nature of the work environment makes violations of labour standards and experiences of harassment difficult to contest or document.

The **delivery sector** has emerged as an entry point for many irregularised men, especially in urban areas. Platform-based business models promote flexibility while transferring costs and risks to workers. Account-sharing practices, informal subcontracting chains, and the role of “fleet partners” create layers of dependency that replicate hierarchies of legality and status. Algorithmic management determines access to work and pay, while police checks and digital ID systems extend border enforcement into the workplace.

Alongside these patterns of dependency, the report documents a range of forms of resistance, organising, and advocacy. Irregularised workers engage in everyday acts of negotiation and mobility—changing employers, sharing information, or forming informal support networks—to navigate hostile systems. In some contexts, collective mobilisation has emerged, often in collaboration with trade unions, migrant associations, and civil-society organisations that offer advice, solidarity, and political visibility. Delivery riders have organised through digital channels to protest unfair conditions; domestic-worker networks and grassroots unions in Italy and the UK have linked struggles for recognition to broader campaigns for social rights; and NGOs across the partner countries provide spaces of protection and collective voice. These initiatives reveal how, even under restrictive regimes, irregularised migrants exercise agency and contribute to evolving forms of social organisation around work and rights.

Despite variation across sectors and countries, several common features can be detected. Irregularised migrants tend to work in roles that combine low visibility with high indispensability. Their limited access to welfare and legal protection reinforces the segmentation of labour markets along lines of gender, race, and status. Fear of detection or deportation discourages formal complaint and participation in collective action, while community initiatives frequently act as informal infrastructures of support.

The comparative analysis highlights how irregularity is institutionally produced rather than merely resulting from individual legal breaches. It emerges from the interplay of restrictive entry regimes, employer-based residence conditions, and fragmented enforcement practices. Labour markets, in turn, accommodate and reproduce this precarious workforce, integrating irregularised migrants into the everyday functioning of European economies.

In sum, irregularity is not an anomaly but a structural feature of contemporary labour regimes. It organises access to work, determines degrees of visibility and protection, and reflects broader hierarchies of gender, race, and mobility that underpin Europe's political economy.

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Introduction

The starting point for this cross-cutting labour market report is the twelve sectoral reports developed within the I-CLAIM project which examined the living and working conditions of migrant workers with no or a precarious legal status in the sectors of agriculture, domestic work and care and delivery in Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom. This comparative report analyses the national policy and legal frameworks shaping the different sectors under study and documents the precarities that migrant workers face in relation to access to decent working and employment conditions, including fair wages, labour and trade union rights, health and safety, and accommodation, alongside the obstacles to their unionisation. Sector specific, as well as communal precarities are identified, as well as possibilities for action and opportunities for policy change.

I-CLAIM research shows that irregularised migrants are dominant in sectors of the economy characterised by informality, weak regulation, and exploitation, reflecting the barriers they face when trying to access formal employment, such as restrictive asylum policies, limited labour migration pathways, lack of skills recognition, discrimination and language barriers. In agriculture, seasonal contracts, weak labour rights, and high levels of undeclared work, coupled with dependence on employers for accommodation and/or residence permits, make irregularised migrant workers extremely vulnerable. Similarly, in domestic work, where migrant women are overrepresented, informality offers employment opportunities but hardly any protection. In food delivery, most workers are formally self-employed but in practice they often work on other people's accounts which makes them dependent on intermediaries and exposes them to exploitation.

These working conditions also shape the possibilities for collective action and representation. Across the countries analysed, trade unions organise, support, and represent irregularised migrant workers in some but not all sectors. It was found that there are significant obstacles to unionise, such as language and cultural differences, the often informal and fragmented nature of migrants' employment, and their lack of awareness of labour rights. Most irregularised migrant workers interact with unions primarily for administrative or legal assistance rather than for collective actions. In most countries and for most sectors the involvement of irregular workers inside unions structures remains limited.

Still, trade unions play a critical role in denouncing labour exploitation and advancing equal treatment. The challenges faced by unions when it comes to irregularised migrant workers should be understood within the broader regulatory and policy landscape. The evidence emerging from the I-CLAIM research resonates with ongoing policy debates across Europe and beyond on how to regulate new and informal forms of work; how to safeguard the rights of those in precarious situations; and how to strengthen decent working conditions for all workers, irrespective of their immigration status. At EU level, upcoming initiatives that could address precarious conditions for irregularised migrant workers and improve safeguards are the Fair Labour Mobility Package and the Roadmap for future-proof quality jobs in a competitive EU². Particularly, the revision of the

¹ We wish to thank very much for their generous support during fieldwork in the West Midlands the Refugee and Migrant Centre, Migrant Voice and Manoel Botelho. We also wish to thank for her comments and feedback on an earlier draft of the report Sabrina Marchetti.

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2917

European Labour Authority (ELA)³ provides a crucial opportunity to strengthen cross-border enforcement and become a central hub for identifying risks, coordinating inspections and supporting the enforcement of labour rights.

Labour mobility and migration are increasingly intertwined, ELA's remit should therefore be extended to cover the Seasonal Workers, the Employers Sanctions and the Anti-Trafficking Directives. Equally important will be the initiatives under the Quality Jobs Act, which should include key elements such as collective bargaining, full respect for workers' and trade union rights, fair wages, good working conditions, health and safety, equality and non-discrimination for all workers.

Similarly, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) draft Convention and Recommendation on decent work in the platform economy⁴ and the EU Directive on improving working conditions in platform work⁵ have also brought momentum to advocacy for improving platform workers' working conditions. These initiatives are particularly relevant for irregularised migrant workers, often overrepresented in this sector. However, even though their heightened vulnerability is recognised, especially when it comes to the problem of undeclared work through 'substitute' accounts, there are no binding measures to address such gap. This highlights the need to reaffirm a fundamental principle: a worker is a worker, irrespective of immigration status, and decent working conditions must be guaranteed for all.

Methodological note

This report is based on an analysis of research conducted over a two-year period (September 2023–August 2025) across six European countries as well as at the level of EU institutions. The research is structured around policy frameworks as well as lived experiences of irregular migrants within specific labour market sectors. The policy analysis spans two decades (2005–2025) whereas fieldwork activities were carried out during the project's implementation (2024–2025) but nonetheless capture the sedimentation of stories and understandings of irregularity over time.

The policy analysis draws on 58 expert interviews between October 2023 and March 2024 alongside a mapping of legislative and normative changes over the past two decades. Whereas the analysis of migrant experiences draws on ethnographic research and 244 in-depth interviews conducted between summer 2024 and spring 2025 with migrant workers in three key sectors: agriculture, domestic work, and food delivery. Complementary interviews with employers, legal professionals, NGO staff, and trade union representatives were also conducted. This component captures the everyday realities of racialised labour segmentation and the structural production of dependency and exclusion among racially minoritised migrants.

³ Areas for improvement include reinforcing the competences on concerted and joined inspections; tackling situations regarding third country nationals within the EU; capacity in processing personal data, simplifying and facilitating access to mediation procedure. See <https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/european-labour-authority-supports-fair-labour-mobility-eu-2025-05-26>. See also ETUC position on this point: <https://www.etuc.org/en/document/position-review-mandate-european-labour-authority>

⁴ <https://www.ilo.org/resource/conference-paper/ilc/ilc114/decent-work-platform-economy>

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/2831/oj/eng>

Number of migrant workers interviewed per country per sector				
Finland	Domestic work:	20	Agriculture:	27
Germany	Delivery work:	22	Agriculture:	18
Italy	Domestic work:	20	Agriculture:	21
Netherlands	Delivery work:	18	Domestic work:	22
Poland	Delivery work:	24	Agriculture:	20
United Kingdom	Delivery work:	12	Domestic work:	20
Total: 244				

A wide group of workers with no or a precarious legal status was interviewed that involved rejected asylum seekers, visa overstayers, Ukrainians under temporary protection directive, and international students with limited rights to work. In domestic work the large majority of respondents was female and in delivery work male. In all countries we worked with community researchers who had a background connected through personal links and local knowledge to the communities under study. With their experiences and knowledge, they contributed to various research activities including fieldwork design, sampling, recruiting, ethnographic observations, interviews and data analysis and dissemination.

Interviews were done online or onsite (e.g. in quiet public spaces such as university rooms, on the street, at the workplace and in people's homes and lasted about one hour. Some interviews were done via the phone because workers preferred to talk while working to break the isolation of the work. All respondents were compensated for their time with a voucher, except for the Finnish workers because financial compensation was not possible due to tax laws. The researchers in Finland provided refreshments and practical information about social services to ensure ethical reciprocity.

The study in agriculture proved to be particularly challenging due to the dispersion, remoteness, and isolation of potential research sites, the intensity of work, and the resulting migrants' exhaustion, accompanied by feelings of fear and insecurity. The unwillingness to be involved in interviews was particularly notable in Germany in the agriculture sector, but also in Poland. For the delivery work sector we encountered mistrust and fear that came most to the fore in the United Kingdom where at the moment of our study delivery work had become an explicit target of surveillance. The domestic work sector fieldwork was challenging in terms of getting access.

1. Irregular Migrant Workers in Agriculture

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In many European countries where agriculture remains a key part of the economy, migrant workers fill seasonal and greenhouse jobs. Agricultural work can serve different groups of migrants as an entry point to the labour market in the host country. Researchers are increasingly focusing on the agriculture and migration nexus, highlighting the growing dependence of farmers on a disposable and flexible foreign workforce (King, Lulle and Melossi, 2021). The ‘migrantisation’ of the agricultural sector has numerous disadvantages for workers and their families, including physical exhaustion, exposure to plant protection products and pesticides, victimisation by informal intermediaries, lack of guaranteed basic labour rights and productivity-dependent wages (i.e. because of piece work scheme payment), with women, typically engaged in picking fruit and vegetables, particularly vulnerable. The prevailing model in seasonal agriculture is often informal employment (i.e. without a written contract) or extremely precarious employment (e.g. employment contracts without basic employee guarantees such as insurance coverage). Although the sector attracts mainly migrants with low human and social capital, students and skilled workers can also be employed there due to the ease of finding this type of work. These workers treat seasonal work as a short-term strategy for maximising their earnings.

Despite scholars’ efforts to research seasonal migration to agriculture in European countries, comparative analyses examining different migration, labour, and welfare regimes related to the conditions of agricultural production are limited (e.g. Triandafyllidou 2013; Corrado, de Castro, and Perrotta 2017; Rye and O’Reilly 2020; Fiałkowska and Matuszczyk 2021). This part of the report draws from the I-CLAIM case studies of seasonal migration in agriculture in Finland (Merikoski & Näre 2025), Germany (Salamena 2025), Italy (Palumbo 2025) and Poland (Matuszczyk 2025) to bring together their key findings on migrants’ working and living conditions as well as their experiences in complex irregular situations, highlighting commonalities and specificities.

1.1. Policy and legal framework of the sector in the four countries under study

The agricultural sector is often regulated under norms that govern seasonal work. In spite of the efforts to provide minimum protection mechanisms for seasonal workers (e.g. the 2014 EU Seasonal Directive) and to penalise unfair employer practices (e.g. the 2009 EU Sanctions Directive), our research shows that the regulations applied in the researched countries generally remain ineffective with regard to seasonal migration. For many years there has been an above-average level of job insecurity, recurring labour exploitation and numerous traps of illegality for migrant agriculture workers. Today, the social conditionality mechanism introduced as part of the EU Common Agricultural Policy in 2025, which aimed to ensure decent working conditions, has not immediately improved the situation of seasonal workers.

At the heart of seasonal migration policies in agriculture in the countries studied lie numerous commonalities in the studied countries, including, above all, a peculiar *status quo* and a lack of consensus or political will to implement measures ensuring better working conditions.

Another common feature of the four countries analysed is the ‘laissez-faire’ approach of the central authorities and their tolerance of the numerous irregularities in the labour market resulting from the behaviour of producers, employers and intermediaries. The dominant role in shaping policy and conditions in this area is played by the interests of farmers and food producers, who base their operations on disposable,

highly mobile, foreign workers. Even before the pandemic, farmers lobbied strongly in favour of liberal migration policies (Matuszczyk, 2025), and the numerous special laws and exemptions from restrictions on mobility and quarantine requirements introduced after 2020 in Germany and Italy confirmed the previously dominant approach in this area. Furthermore, individual countries are establishing recruitment mechanisms or dedicated access facilities for migrants, often based on farmers' preferences, for a defined (desired) group of workers. Examples include bilateral agreements with workers' countries of origin (Germany, Italy and Finland), and the fact that seasonal migration in Poland or Finland is almost exclusively based on one group of foreigners: Ukrainians. Policy makers also treat employment in agriculture as a strategy for the economic integration of refugees in host countries (Italy).

A noticeable feature of agricultural employment remains the above-average proportion of undeclared work in this sector. This includes working without the correct residency documents, working without a written contract or overtime work. Although all four countries have contracts for legal employment in agriculture, their use may remain low as for example in Poland. Furthermore, the policies of these countries demonstrate the agricultural exceptionalism paradigm (as a prominent example of sectoral regulatory regime), which is characterised by numerous exemptions for seasonal workers from general labour law and social security provisions. For instance, In Germany seasonal workers performing 'occasional' work are excluded from the social security system. In Poland, where a specific type of harvest assistance contract has been in place since 2018, workers only entitled to accident, sickness, maternity and health insurance. However, this type of employment is hardly used. It also does not guarantee a minimum wage or employment for a clearly defined period (Matuszczyk, 2024).

1.2. Precarities related to access

A comparative analysis shows that, in all four countries, the recruitment process for seasonal workers is characterised by informality alongside bilateral agreements, a strong dependence on intermediaries (often operating outside the law) and the systematic exploitation of migrants' weak financial position.

For example, in Germany it was found that bilateral agreements to recruit workers from non-EU countries such as Georgia or Kazakhstan operate in parallel to informal networks to recruit EU nationals (mainly from Poland, Romania and Bulgaria). The recruitment of workers is strongly rooted in informal social networks and is decentralised. Farms often use internal workers as key figures in the recruitment and communication process. Although there are bilateral agreements for third-country nationals, most EU citizens are thus recruited directly by farmers or through informal intermediaries. It is common practice to rely on the contacts of already employed workers, who recommend 'good workers' to their employers (see Fiałkowska & Matuszczyk, 2021). Consequently, workers have little knowledge of their rights and often sign non-transparent contracts.

In Poland, the seasonal work recruitment system is based on a well-developed mobile regime and mobile workers from Ukraine. A well-developed network of intermediaries remains a vital part of the migration infrastructure for workers from Ukraine. Although in the past, there were markets in cities where employees were directly recruited, now private bus drivers play a central role. These individuals provide transport from Ukraine to Poland, identify and organise employment for specific individuals, and provide assistance in emergencies. They work closely with farmers, 'supplying' them with an agreed number of workers for a specific job (e.g. a specific group of women for strawberry picking, see Matuszczyk 2024).

In Italy despite the existence of special regulations that establish entry quotas for seasonal workers, their implementation is ineffective in practice (Palumbo 2025). Informal recruitment arrangements are even more prevalent than in the other countries under study, with a *caporalato* system (illegal gang-master system) that controls employment. In agriculture, some female migrants, often dubbed ‘mamas’, act as team leaders and can serve as role models for other women, but they can also display abusive behaviour towards their colleagues, reflecting the ambiguous nature of this role. On the other hand, the official Flow Decrees (*Decreto Flussi*) system involves lengthy, convoluted bureaucratic procedures hindering effective and transparent processes and not preventing fraudulent job offers or illegal practices in entry procedure (Palumbo & Marchetti 2024).

Finland has the most formalised system of seasonal worker recruitment, mainly due to the requirement for workers to obtain seasonal visas and certificates. But in reality the system is complex, and migrant workers are often unable to complete the procedure on their own. Almost all workers use recruiters to help them find jobs, arrange travel and complete visa formalities. Although charging fees for arranging jobs and documents is illegal, it is a common practice that labour inspectors have described as the ‘worst scourge’ in the sector (Merikoski & Näre 2025). Employers often appoint ‘trusted workers’ as interpreters. Vietnamese workers, especially those in greenhouse production, often must take out large loans from brokers, which leads to long-term dependency.

1.3. Precarities related to payment

Our research across all the four countries showed various types of precarities related to payments, manifesting differently depending on the intersection of gender, race, nationality and legal status. The agricultural work turned out to be generally underpaid with low wages often calculated in a non-transparent way and usually using the piece-based scheme. The data from Italy and Poland showed substantial levels of payments without contracts, unregistered contracts, or informal cash payments alongside formal employment (partially undeclared).

The prevalence and normalisation of irregular employment of farm workers (both Polish and foreign) in Poland can be encapsulated by the statement of one of the local stakeholders who admitted that they had not yet encountered a situation in which a farmer employed a foreign worker in a fully legal way: “Today, I think it is impossible” (Matuszczyk 2025). Generally, even if workers had contracts, they reported being enumerated differently than in documents, e.g. with smaller wages, working different hours (usually longer) and/or below minimum wage/collective agreement.

Even the Finnish case, while displaying the most formalised, clear and stable working conditions, also provided evidence for some irregularities, such as working for another employer than the one listed on the residence permit or seasonal work certificate without notifying authorities, or deviations from contracts, including working longer hours, performing different tasks, undertaking part of the work for cash, receiving different wages, having overtime calculated differently, or facing unreasonable obligatory deductions from wages, for example for accommodation (Merikoski & Näre 2025).

Across all countries studied, workers who maintained long-lasting relationships with employers were paid more and enjoyed better working and living conditions. Our studies also exposed unexpected differences in payment based on immigration status. This can be illustrated by the German case, highlighting differences between the conditions of those based on short-term employment of EU citizens (e.g. from Romania) and

migrants with quota-based employment based on a bilateral agreement with Germany for employees from countries such as Georgia or Kazakhstan, with the latter enjoying more transparent and more favourable working conditions (Salamena 2025). Although minimum wage was generally paid in Germany, disparities existed among workers, evident in cases where one spouse received the minimum rate, while the other was registered as a housewife/househusband and paid substantially less. The vulnerability of agricultural workers is further exacerbated by the fact that wages were often paid at the end of the season.

The Italian research provided evidence for gender inequality, with women employed for less skilled and lower-paid tasks. A particularly hard and challenging situation experienced migrant mothers who, regardless of working all week, often struggled to pay their rent, buy basic groceries and cover other essential expenses (Palumbo 2025). At the same time, their precarious legal status often prevented them from accessing children's benefits and free care facilities, so they are often forced to pay for childcare (see also Nare et al. 2025).

Differences in economic vulnerability between groups can be demonstrated by the case of Vietnamese greenhouse workers in Finland, providing the example of high levels of vulnerability because of debts resulting from migration and unlawfully charged recruitment fees (Merikoski & Näre 2025), as well as the case of the exploitation of Roma and Sinti agricultural workers in Germany. These cases also revealed the racial dimension of exploitation and the nexus of structural disadvantages, economic precarity, social exclusions and racialisation (Piemontese et al. 2025). The interviewed Roma and Sinti workers in Germany represented a group particularly vulnerable in financial and socio-structural terms, sometimes suffering from illiteracy, with one participant admitting to collecting cans and bottles and getting resources for food (Salamena 2025). The latter group can also be characterised by male dominance, not only in the number of farmworkers but also in translating into women's larger vulnerabilities and dangers.

1.4. Precarities related to access to rights

In all cases studied, precarities related to access to rights were observed, including insufficient information on wage calculations, hours, sick and holiday leaves, accompanied by fears of claiming rights. In Germany, particularly those who were not recruited through bilateral agreements but directly employed by farmers or intermediaries lacked knowledge about their rights and the terms of their employment, with contracts only in German, often signed without details and not handed to workers (Salamena 2025). There were examples when workers did not receive payments for additional hours and were rarely informed about tax declarations and possible tax returns. Despite the new requirement of the 2025 EU Common Agricultural Policy conditioning subsidies on compliance with labour and social protection standards—and despite its provisions for administrative penalties when workers' rights, health and safety are violated—implementation has not been regulated. So far, in Germany, there has been no specific authority to monitor occupational safety in the workplace, with only customs authorities interfering in the case of financial and customs-related allegations, which reflects the words of the following expert:

It is already very difficult for us to get in touch with the people, and often they don't want to testify or assert their claims. Customs only checks paperwork, and it is mostly accurate. The living conditions are not checked, even though people are living in barracks, four in a room of 8m². The public prosecutor is often informed, but no one wants to testify because they want to return to work (migrant rights advocate, Germany, in Salamena 2025:5)

Similarly, in Poland, the monitoring of working conditions is low, with limited control exercised by the state labour inspectorate. Most farms are family endeavours, not seen as typical businesses, which officially do not employ workers or do so on the basis of civil law contracts. The research also revealed that despite the possibility of employing seasonal workers on the basis of harvesting contracts, which entitle them to a minimum form of social security, farmers practically never use this solution. Consequently, employees who had suffered an accident at work were forced to rely on the goodwill of their employer and their commitment to contribute to the costs of treatment.

In Italy, several national interventions have been undertaken to deal with labour exploitation in agriculture since the adoption of Law 199/201, which aims to address and prevent labour exploitation and illegal gang-mastering in agriculture⁶ (Palumbo 2024). These interventions include the joint activity of labour inspectors and cultural mediators from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), as well as the establishment of “Integrated Social Hubs” to address the needs of migrant workers who could be victims of exploitation. However, they are usually short-term project-based actions not addressing other issues related to housing or transport, and previously not covering all agriculture zones. Despite the fact that in 2023 a National Monitoring Committee for the implementation of the Strategic Plan of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027 was established, rules and monitoring mechanisms linked to social conditionality have not been effectively specified.

In Finland, most workers in the farming sector are employed regularly, i.e., they hold migration and work permits, and their work contracts comply with the minimum requirements of the collective agreement for agricultural trade, which defines work conditions for all employees, regardless of their status or union membership (Merikoski & Näre 2025). However, the permit system protecting workers by obliging employers to follow collective agreements, tying workers to employers, makes them vulnerable to exploitation, in addition to the mentioned problem of unlawful fees for recruitment. Moreover, almost all residence permits held by migrant workers in agriculture are temporary, conditional and precarious. For instance, according to new legislation effective since June 2025, non-EU migrants who lose their job after less than two years need to find new employment within three months or must leave Finland. Also, the resources of the labour inspectorate, which is supposed to monitor the fulfilment of work conditions, are limited, and it focuses primarily on previously identified farms as problematic.

1.5. Precarities related to health and safety

The research in all four countries uncovered different challenges and dangers related to health and safety, as well as mental health risks. Work in agriculture is physically hard and demanding, exposing workers to adverse weather conditions (e.g. heat, sun, rain), and leading to overstretching, pain and allergies. Migrants tend to work very long hours to maximise their lowly paid earnings, opting for more hours as the Polish case shows:

⁶ Among other provisions, this law introduced a revision of the criminal offence of “labour exploitation” within the Criminal Code.

The hours weren't standardised — they depended on us. In fact, we regulated them ourselves. He [the employer] asked us how long we wanted to work for. We could work for 8, 10–12 hours, but it was usually 10 hours. If the entire crop had to be harvested, it could take up to 12 hours. He didn't force us — he said it was necessary, but it was up to us. Everyone wanted to earn money, so we tried our best. I mean, 12 hours was a lot, but we managed. We just got used to it (Ukrainian migrant worker in her 40s, Poland, in Matuszczyk 2025:14).

Performance-based remuneration and pressure for keeping pace, isolation and unstable situations exacerbate stress and exhaustion. Repetitive work as well as limited and problematic possibilities for breaks (usually without adequate conditions, so no water, snacks or toilets provided) and leaves made workers highly constrained. In some cases, as the German data showed, the labour environment, which can be characterised by the mix of informal coercion, surveillance and selective incentives, can lead to anxiety reflected in interviewees' experiences expressed in the words: *I'm not in a prison, why is this happening to me?* (a migrant from Romania cited by Salamena 2025:9)

Furthermore, our research provides evidence of an oppressive workplace environment related to tight control (in the Italian case with sometimes even restrictions on communication during work hours), intergroup tensions and verbal aggression from leaders or employers. This was disproportionately affecting highly racialised groups whose perception was fueled by prejudices and power dynamics, which led to their larger discrimination and exploitation. Such environment makes people silent about their needs and rights as they are afraid of being dismissed:

I've worked in companies where the bosses and team leaders were very harsh, and if you complain about anything, you work for a day or two and then you're left without a job. (Ukrainian migrant worker in her 40s, Italy, in Palumbo 2025:12)

As the Italian report also documented, this could be accompanied by sexist remarks and harassment, as well as more severe examples of gender-based violence from employers and co-workers:

One employer made a [sexual related] request to me and another worker during lunch break... We refused. Then he said, "Leave, because you're not working well..." My friend and I had to walk home through the countryside for kilometers, under the sun. (Ukrainian migrant worker in her 30s, Italy, in Palumbo 2025:4)

The studied cases provided evidence for unsafe working conditions related to makeshift constructions used to reach fruits, outdated and/or overloaded machines and vehicles, sometimes used in non-proper or no traffic regulation-compliant ways. The examples from all countries demonstrated serious issues with occupational safety and health protection, e.g. no socio-sanitarian facilities, breaks, and no sufficient protection from dangerous chemicals.

Migrant workers often performed jobs even if they felt unwell, not only to earn more but also not to be perceived as unworthy to be employed, invited next time or not to be fired after experiencing sickness, as a participant cited below:

One time, it was so hot under the greenhouse that I started vomiting. I went home and didn't go to work the next day, and then the employer didn't want me back anymore (Ukrainian migrant worker in her 30s, Italy, in Palumbo 2025:13)

Workers tended to avoid professional medical assistance due to lack of access to such help, fear of the reaction of employers and the possibility of prompting inspection on a farm, so they tried to deal with sickness on their own, e.g. sourcing medicines individually. Only severe illness was recognized as allowing for absence, yet the issue of payments was not addressed or problematic. In the case of serious illnesses, workers were usually dependent on their employers to be taken to health care facilities because of transport issues, language barriers and limited knowledge of how to navigate in such circumstances. In the case of informally employed workers, as prevailed in Poland, farm workers seek help in the private health sector. It is worthwhile to mention that sometimes even legal employment in agriculture did not guarantee access to public health care, as in Germany, where short-term employment in agriculture is exempt from contributions, so it does not ensure health care or pension rights (Salamena 2025).

Instead, in Finland, access to healthcare is highly diversified depending on migrants' statuses. Temporary workers must, by law, have access to healthcare, provided by employers in the case of those with a seasonal work certificate, unless they were under Temporary Protection Directive, when municipalities or reception services provided assistance (Merikoski & Näre 2025). Those with an A work-based permit are allowed to access municipal services, and their employer has to provide a minimum level of employment-based health services.

1.6. Precarities related to housing and transportation to work

In the majority of the cases studied, migrant workers in agriculture live in remote and isolated areas where cultivation took place. The housing situation of farm employees usually living in employers' accommodation, could be generally described as rather substandard, despite some improvements made by farmers in Finland and Poland. However, efforts to improve housing conditions may be limited as some stakeholder interviews highlighted the sector can also be precarious for farmer entrepreneurs due to different challenges and risks, and it is difficult for farmers to make a profit. In Poland, specific, relatively close (patronage) relations exist between farmers and migrant workers within the context of small family-run farms where workers live and often work with their employers. This could, on one hand, produce a more liveable context yet increase the levels of control, vulnerability and dependability of workers on farmers – the latter being observable in different cases of living in employers' facilities across our studies.

In general, the analysed case studies show evident differences in housing conditions related to the relations with farmers, length of employment and workers' skills and position (e.g. better in the case of machine operators or individuals helping with administrative work). In Italy, despite efforts to address labour exploitation, particularly in agriculture, little development has been seen in terms of improving housing and transport conditions (Palumbo 2025). In one particularly difficult case, Roma workers in Germany were staying in crowded shared accommodation in barracks, charged 12 Euro per person per day, directly deducted from wages, with shared sanitary facilities outside (Salamena 2025).

While migrants live on farms or in their vicinity, they experience difficulties related to transport and access to such places as shops, healthcare or social, cultural and religious facilities. As they usually cannot rely on public transport due to remoteness of the workplace, are dependent on employers' assistance or less often try to organise transport alternatively – by car sharing or renting/buying second-hand bicycles.

Unlike in other contexts, our research also included examples of migrants living in urban areas and needing to commute to farms, as those working in greenhouse farming in Osterbothnia (Finland) and mixed cultivation in the provinces of Caserta and Naples (Italy). The Finnish case demonstrated the difficult living conditions of the Vietnamese working in shifts in greenhouses and staying in overcrowded, needing substantial repairs, privately rented flats (Merikoski & Näre 2025). This example can also illustrate racialised economic and social vulnerability and exploitation when compared to the better position and situation of Ukrainian farm workers in private or social housing. However, Ukrainian farmworkers in Italy provided an example of migrants affected by uncertainty and vulnerability in substandard, individually rented apartment buildings in urban areas:

Unlike other regions, Campania is not represented by the narrative that identifies ghettos as places where farm workers live. Based on our analysis, this is due to the availability of housing units — properties that would not be viable on the regular market because they are substandard, with many lacking connections to the sewage system, for example (NGO member specialising in labour exploitation, in Palumbo 2025:14).

In the face of poor public transport and large distances, migrants needed to rely on employers or pay individually for informal private transport. Work precarities extended to living conditions and all aspects of life. The unavailable public services and childcare, combined with challenging work and the lack of family networks, put enormous strain on mothers, who were almost always alone responsible for care and forced them to rely on informal childcare arrangements (Palumbo 2025). This was accompanied by language barriers, social isolation, gender specific challenges and racialisation.

1.7. Resistance from migrant workers, (lack of) mobilisation/unionization in the sector

Generally, seasonal workers tend not to be interested in activism or being a member of labour organisations. For many migrant women in Italy, trade unions are primarily a source of information on fiscal and contractual matters. The study by Corrado et al. (2018) confirmed the emergence of grassroots resistance initiatives among seasonal workers, as well as consumer movements campaigning for fairer agriculture. However, our studies show that migrant women rarely express an interest in political activism or trade union mobilisation. Interviewed migrant workers attribute this to their busy work and personal lives, feelings of frustration, and the belief that no one will listen to them or that they cannot change their situation, particularly when their legal status is uncertain. The basic social reference point for many women can be the local parish. In Italy, it is common amongst workers to have tactics that help them legalising residence while continuing to work irregularly. For instance, women may deliberately purchase an employment contract from an employer for whom they do not actually work (Palumbo 2025). This is an intentional strategy to obtain legal residence status and access to family benefits. In situations of sexual violence, one strategy is to leave such an employer. Most employees in crisis situations consciously avoid official institutions (e.g. by fleeing labour inspections), mainly due to fears about the consequences of irregular employment.

Despite its long history and various channels, little is known about examples of worker resistance to seasonal agricultural migration to Germany. One of the most significant examples of organised resistance occurred in 2021 when 18 workers from Georgia initiated labour law proceedings with the support of an NGO. More commonly, workers mainly passively resist unfair employers for fear of losing their jobs. Although trade unions are well established in Germany and have the necessary staff and resources, it remains very difficult to reach seasonal workers. Organisations working on migrants' rights, such as Fair Mobility, and trade unions struggle to reach

seasonal workers due to the remote and rural location of farms and farmers' vigilance. The main burden of providing information on labour rights falls to partially state-funded NGOs, but their efforts have little impact on working and living conditions in practice. Despite the available support, fear of losing their jobs and livelihoods is the biggest obstacle to taking legal action, with migrants refusing to testify in court or to the police. Internal divisions and social fragmentation among workers (e.g. ethnic divisions between Roma and non-Roma Romanians) also appear to significantly hinder organisation and collective resistance.

In Finland, a strategy that minimises the risk of exploitation by dishonest employers is for seasonal workers to return to the same proven employers year after year. This enables them to avoid recruitment traps and high fees. However, some migrants voluntarily pay an intermediary for good-quality services and information about good job offers. In the context of Ukrainians' growing importance in agriculture, the I-CLAIM research has confirmed that these migrants deliberately switch to sectors such as cleaning to obtain more stable Type A permits, which count towards citizenship. Furthermore, the Temporary Protection Directive gives Ukrainians the freedom to choose their employer, which is increasing their agency. In Finland, employees have the right to contact the farmers' union for assistance, even if they are not members. The Labour Inspectorate monitors compliance with working conditions and accepts anonymous reports of employer misconduct. Despite the existence of these formal channels, workers rarely use official avenues to pursue claims. This is due to a lack of trust in the authorities, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with the system. Nevertheless, seasonal workers can obtain information (through official sites) about their rights (e.g. the minimum wage) and bypass intermediaries, which suggests that they are able to learn and adapt within the system to some extent.

Compared with Italy, the struggles of migrant seasonal workers in agriculture and their strategies in Germany, Finland and Poland has received little attention in the literature. Especially in Poland, the limited research that exists in this area provides an incomplete picture of workers' agency or bargaining power in rural areas. However, research conducted as part of the I-CLAIM project seems to confirm earlier observations (Matuszczyk 2024) that employers are more likely to make concessions to workers in the face of a growing shortage of seasonal workers. While decent working conditions are not guaranteed, employees can expect a high degree of flexibility and understanding from their employers. However, this often involves informal employment, working for an undefined period or allowing employees to bring their children. When asked about strategies for dealing with difficult situations, Ukrainian employees most often mention the support of informal intermediaries, such as Ukrainian bus drivers. None of the migrants interviewed indicated that they used formal institutions or migrant organisations.

There are no employee or advocacy organisations in Poland that represent the interests of foreign seasonal workers in agriculture. National organisations also do not provide dedicated activities or support for this category of migrant worker. The lack of organised activities and migrant organisations operating outside rural areas remains a problem in Poland, as confirmed by research conducted in the Grójec district. Consequently, seasonal agriculture work in Poland remains invisible to the public, particularly discussions on workers' rights (regardless of citizenship). In reality, it is primarily farmers' organisations that have a decisive influence on employment relations in agriculture.

2. Domestic Work in Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Finland

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The domestic work sector is one of the main areas of employment for migrant workers across Europe, including those in precarious or undocumented situations. Several factors contribute to this. Traditionally carried out by women within the household as part of the gendered division of labour, paid domestic work today remains indispensable to society and in constant demand, often compensating for gaps in welfare systems (Anderson 2000; Da Roit 2010; Marchetti 2022). Yet, it is generally avoided by native workers within a labour market highly segmented by gender, nationality and class. At the same time, the secluded and informal nature of domestic work often makes it a “refuge” sector for migrants in irregular situations, allowing such irregularities to remain largely invisible. It also provides an easily accessible source of income, while live-in arrangements offer accommodation.

However, the sector's specific features—its invisibility, the personal and often unequal nature of employer/employee relationships, the demand for short-term and highly flexible labour, the isolation of workers and limited labour inspectorate oversight—collectively foster and perpetuate undeclared work (ELA 2022) and exploitative conditions (see, for instance, Ricard-Guay & Maroukis 2017). As discussed below, these dynamics are further reinforced by the interaction of irregularity infrastructures that produce and amplify the social and legal vulnerabilities of migrant workers.

2.1. Policy and legal framework of the sector in the four countries under study

The domestic work sector is characterised by gendered and migrant dimensions in all four countries where I-CLAIM's research on this sector focused: Italy, Finland, the Netherlands and the UK. In Italy, official data for 2023 recorded 833,874 registered domestic workers, estimated to represent only 54% of the actual workforce (CENSIS, 2024). Among them, 68.9% were foreign-born and 88.3% were women (ISTAT, 2024). In Finland, around 22,000–25,000 people work as home care workers, home cleaners, or housekeepers, with migrants making up over 11% of all domestic workers and 40% of home cleaners (Statistics Finland, 2025). Women remain the majority, though migrant men account for about one-third of cleaners. A similar pattern is observed in the Netherlands, where women dominate the sector but migrant men are also well represented, particularly in cleaning roles (Hajer & Van Liempt, 2025).

It is worth noting that the Netherlands is one of the few European countries where domestic work does not qualify for a residence permit. Indeed, there is no specific entry route for this sector, nor is it possible to convert an existing residence permit issued for another purpose into a work permit for domestic work. Moreover, for any job, labour market testing applies, requiring proof that no suitable candidate is available in the Netherlands or elsewhere in the EU to perform the work, which is an impossible requirement and results in no opening up of legal routes into this sector.

In the other three I-CLAIM countries—Italy, the UK, and Finland—there are entry channels that allow third-country nationals to be employed in the domestic work sector. In Finland, a work-based residence permit can be obtained for domestic work (including cleaning) if the employment is full-time, the contract complies with collective agreements and the monthly earnings exceed €1,600 after tax. Furthermore, domestic work is considered a sector with labour shortages in many regions of the country and accordingly a non-EU migrant can be hired without assessing the availability of national or EU workers for the job (i.e. labour

market testing). This exemption from labour market testing means that migrants are encouraged to seek employment in this field regardless of their education, skills or qualifications. For many migrants in irregular or precarious situations, cleaning work has provided an easy way to regularise their status (Merikoski & Näre, 2025). However, recent restrictive migration policies in Finland—particularly the 2024 provision preventing rejected asylum seekers from applying for employment-based residence permits—have further limited migrants' options. In addition, under the revised assessment of labour shortage occupations in the Helsinki metropolitan region, home cleaning is no longer exempt from labour market testing, making direct recruitment of domestic cleaners from abroad no longer a viable option. These restrictive measures are likely to increase forms of irregularity (Merikoski et al., 2024).

In the UK, migrant domestic workers are mainly employed through two routes. The first is the Overseas Domestic Worker (ODW) visa, which allows third-country nationals to accompany their employers to the UK for up to six months. Since 2016, ODW visa holders have been allowed to change employers within the domestic work sector (Piemontese & Sigona, 2024), but the visa remains highly restrictive: it excludes access to public funds, prohibits work outside private households, and cannot be extended except in limited cases (UK Visas and Immigration, 2025). These constraints increase workers' legal and social vulnerabilities. The second route is the Health and Care Worker visa, open to care workers and home carers since 2022. This policy has enabled UK employers to recruit internationally, with around 60,000 visas issued—32% of all Health and Care Worker visas in this period (Sumption & Brindle, 2023). However, while entry has been liberalised, insufficient safeguards for migrants' rights have left many at risk of legal precarity and financial insecurity (Sigona et al., 2025).

In Italy, specific quotas for domestic and care workers under the Flows Decree (*Decreto Flussi*) were introduced between 2005 and 2011 and reinstated in 2023 after a decade-long pause. The 2023–2025 Three-Year Plan allocates 9,500 annual entries for domestic workers, totalling 28,500 over three years⁷. However, employers' organisations estimate a need for around 23,000 new caregivers each year, revealing a significant gap between legal entry channels and actual labour market demand (CENSIS, 2024). Lengthy and complex procedures have made the Flows Decree system largely ineffective, often fostering irregularity instead of reducing it. The process has also been linked to abusive and illegal practices such as the sale of job, facilitated by intermediaries, sometimes resulting in migrants arriving to find no employment and becoming undocumented (Palumbo & Marchetti, 2024; De Blasis & Bonizzoni 2024). It is also worth noting that domestic and care workers have historically been among the main beneficiaries of Italy's regularisation schemes (2002, 2009, 2012, and 2020). The most recent regularisation scheme, adopted in 2020 during the

⁷ For more information, see <https://prefettura.interno.gov.it/it/prefetture/spezia/decreto-flussi-2023-2025>. It is worth mentioning that Decree-Law No. 145/2024, converted into Law No. 187/2024, provided for the entry of 10,000 migrant workers in 2025 to be employed in the home or social care sector for the care of people over 80 and persons with disabilities, outside the quotas established by the Flows Decree. The recently adopted Flows Decree for the 2026–2028 period increases the quotas for domestic workers to 13,600 in 2026, 14,000 in 2027, and 14,200 in 2028. Additionally, the Decree confirms an extra “out-of-quota” channel for migrant workers employed in the care of people over 80 or those with certified disabilities, and extends this to the care of children under six. Further information can be found at: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/decreto-flussi-2026-2028-previste-497550-quote-tre-anni-precompilazione-domande-dal-23-ottobre>

Covid-19 pandemic, was criticised for its inefficiency and limited impact on workers' needs (Pasquinelli & Rusmini, 2021; Portoghese et al., 2024; Bonizzoni et al., 2025).

Inadequacies in national migration policies intersect with gaps in the national labour regulation of the domestic work sector. While Italy and Finland have ratified the ILO's 2011 Domestic Workers Convention, the UK and the Netherlands have not. Yet, even where specific regulations exist, domestic workers are often treated differently from other workers and enjoy fewer rights –reflecting the ongoing difficulty in recognising reproductive labour as “real” work. In Italy, for instance, although domestic work is regulated by National Law No. 339/1958 and supported by collective bargaining since 1974, domestic and care workers still face limited social security coverage, limited employer-paid sickness benefits, and can be dismissed without just cause, while maternity leave remains only partially guaranteed (Borelli, 2021).

In the UK, domestic workers lack fundamental rights, including the 48-hour weekly working time limit (Sedacca, 2023). However, the “family worker exemption”, which allowed employers to pay below the minimum wage, was abolished in April 2024 following sustained advocacy by groups coordinated by the Nanny Solidarity Network (ATLEU, 2023).

In the Netherlands, domestic work remains one of the least regulated employment sectors, largely due to the Regulation on Service Provision at Home, the so-called *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis*, which exempts employers from several standard labour rules. Under this regulation, work does not need to be declared unless performed for at least four days a week, allowing cash payments without formal contracts. To be fully regular, domestic work must be declared to tax and labour authorities, yet many workers fail to do so or chose not to. Without a residence permit or without the right to work one cannot register. Even when fully regular, domestic workers are excluded from standard social insurance schemes and receive no unemployment, disability, or pension benefits, with only six weeks of paid sick leave instead of the usual two years. Research shows that few employers are aware of the relevant laws and workers' rights. This policy creates an ambiguous legal framework that facilitates informal employment while also providing job opportunities for those excluded from the formal labour market, such as irregular migrants (Hajer & Van Liempt 2025).

In Finland, unlike in the other three countries, domestic workers (including cleaners) enjoy the same rights as other workers. The only exception is housekeepers, who are not covered by any collective agreements (unlike cleaners, for example) and therefore have fewer rights, particularly regarding wages. However, a worker's immigration status still determines which social and welfare services they are entitled to.

2.2. Precarities related to access

Across all four I-CLAIM countries, migrant domestic workers hold a variety of legal statuses. These include temporary work permit holders, students, holders of international or temporary protection, asylum seekers, EU citizens (often in irregular situations), and undocumented individuals. Furthermore, most of the migrant domestic workers interviewed for the ICLAIM research project have moved between different legal statuses over time and experienced periods of irregularity, regardless of their current status.

Our research reveals that these workers are recruited through various channels. Traditional informal networks, such as word-of-mouth referrals, personal contacts, family ties, co-national or church community networks, are

the predominant mechanisms for securing employment in most countries. These channels also often involve means such as Facebook or Whatsapp groups sharing information about work opportunities.

Another channel is through employment agencies, including transnational ones. In some cases, such as for cleaners, these agencies also directly hire the workers. Online platforms dedicated to recruiting domestic workers have started to emerge, but these are not commonly used in the countries examined.

In Italy, especially in the South, migrant domestic workers – mainly women – typically find employment through informal intermediaries, who are often fellow citizens that arrived in Italy years earlier and have since built local networks. Another common pathway is through personal connections, such as relatives or friends already residing in the country. These services are rarely offered free of charge. As one participant, who held temporary protection status and worked without a contract, explained:

They sell jobs. You know this, it's nothing new (Ukrainian domestic worker in Italy, in Marchetti & Lashchuk 2025: 8).

In Finland, domestic workers, particularly cleaners, who are recruited directly from abroad are often brought in through an agency or another type of migration broker. However, as in other sectors, there are cases where migrant workers have been promised good job opportunities, only to find on arrival that these do not actually exist, with the risk that people can find themselves in conditions of irregularity.

In the Netherlands, particularly within the Brazilian community, newcomers often begin as “helpers,” working alongside more experienced domestic workers – usually contacts found through family ties or social media networks. Earnings are shared between helpers and senior workers, sometimes equally but often unequally, with helpers reportedly earning as little as €5 an hour. This arrangement reflects a system of mutual dependency, in which newcomers rely on intermediaries within their community for access to work, housing, and vital information. While these relationships can provide initial support, they also create space for exploitation (Hajer & Van Liempt 2025).

In the UK, migrant workers' access to domestic work is also often facilitated by co-national and church community networks, who play a significant role in this process. It is not uncommon for some of these intermediaries to exploit the legal and social vulnerabilities of migrant workers (Sigona et al. 2025).

In general, a range of actors – ranging from personal contact and community networks to recruitment agencies – play a crucial role in facilitating the recruitment of migrant workers in the domestic work sector, often extracting value from the vulnerabilities of these workers produced by relevant migration legal and policy framework.

In this context, relationships with employers are also often ambivalent. Across the countries examined, while employers can provide valuable support, the persistent devaluation of domestic work and the intimate nature of the sector – especially in live-in arrangements – can enable abuses of power, leading to undeclared work and labour rights violations. Many employers, moreover, do not perceive themselves as such and remain unaware of their obligations. Racialised and gendered stereotypes also shape hiring practices, preferences and attitudes, reinforcing unequal power relations within the sector.

Research in Finland and the Netherlands, where live-in domestic work is more rare, reveals that many domestic workers, particularly cleaners, rarely see or interact with their employers. In some cases, they have never even met the people whose homes they clean. Nonetheless, as research conducted in the Netherlands (Hajer & van Liempt 2025) shows, the nature of domestic work makes the employment relationship very intimate, even when the employers are not present. Domestic workers are often granted access to the most private areas of the home, often holding keys and managing tasks that shape the intimate rhythms of daily life. This trust typically arises from referrals and reputation rather than personal relationships. A domestic worker from Brazil for example illustrates how impersonal the work often is.

Most of the houses I work in hardly ever have anyone at home, so I see very little of them. I have the keys to the house and we book on days when no-one will be home so that I'm free to work.
(Brazilian domestic worker, the Netherlands, in Hajer & Van Liempt 2025: 8).

However, closer contact with employers can blur the line between professional and personal spheres, complicating discussions around pay and workload. While such relationships may offer support in the form of assistance with processes such as regularisation, as has been seen in Italy, this closeness can also mean that employers start to act more like friends or family members. This can undermine the enforcement of legal obligations.

These dynamics are most evident among live-in domestic workers, which are particularly common in Italy, where living with employers can lead to dependency and the erosion of employment relationship boundaries. Treating live-in workers as “family” often serves to legitimise and normalise overwork, unpaid labour and, at times, severe exploitation.

Of particular interest in Finland is the “cleaning circle” arrangement, a term used to describe informal solidarity-based initiatives supporting migrants, particularly asylum seekers. Up to 25 households contribute a fixed amount towards regular cleaning services, enabling the home cleaner to receive a full-time contract and apply for a work-based residence permit. Although the system promotes inclusion and formal employment, it can also create dependency and informality (Merikoski & Näre 2025).

2.3. Precarities related to payment

In all four countries examined by I-CLAIM, many migrant domestic workers either lack a contract or hold one whose terms, especially with regard to wages and working hours, do not reflect their actual working conditions. As mentioned previously, the idea of being “part of the family” often obscures the employment relationship itself, legitimising low pay, unpaid labour and other substandard conditions while discouraging workers from demanding better pay and asserting their rights.

Naturally, legal precariousness due to the temporariness of residence permits and dependency on employers affect workers’ bargaining power and ability to negotiate, making it more difficult for them to claim their rights. In fact, research conducted in the Netherlands shows that those who are able to negotiate are mainly workers with a more secure legal status (Hajer & Van Liempt, 2025).

In the Netherlands, for example, a major challenge when it comes to negotiating domestic working conditions is the widespread “no work, no pay” approach: if an employee misses work due to illness or if an employer cancels, they simply do not get paid.

If it's holiday. Yeah. And the employers, they said don't work because we are on holiday, so they don't allow because the house is still clean. So that is six weeks without us. So, if you are not working then no pay (Filipino domestic worker, the Netherlands in Hajer & Van Liempt, 2025: 10).

Importantly, during the COVID-19 lockdown, a trade union campaign in the Netherlands highlighted how the “no work, no pay” rule sometimes left domestic workers unprotected, revealing the sector’s weak labour regulations and precarious working conditions.

Wages in Italy’s domestic work sector are also low and are often paid, either wholly or partly, “off the books”. Even when workers have a contract, it is common for them to cover the social security contributions that should legally be paid by employers, further reducing their income. One participant explained that she had no choice but to accept this arrangement, as holding a regular status was her only opportunity to travel back to Ukraine to see her daughter:

“I agreed, and instead of €440, I started receiving €340” (Ukrainian domestic worker, Italy in Marchetti & Lashchuk, 2025: 9).

Similar dynamics aimed at reducing payments emerge in countries such as Finland and the UK, revealing how the conditionality of residence permits on a specific employer or sector traps migrant workers, preventing them from demanding higher wages and weakening their bargaining power. In the UK, for example, many domestic workers arrive on visas intended for skilled workers that are tied to a specific employer. This means that they cannot change jobs without a new Certificate of Sponsorship. Consequently, they often accept poor pay and conditions in order to maintain their legal right to remain in the country (Sigona et al. 2025). I-CLAIM research in Finland highlights that, in some cases, employers withhold workers’ documents to pressure them into performing extra work without pay.

2.4. Precarities related to access to rights

Low wages, exhausting working hours (particularly for live-in workers) and limited or non-existent protection and benefits (especially for undocumented workers) are common features of migrant domestic workers’ conditions across the countries examined.

In the Netherlands, under the Regulation on Service Provision at Home (*Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis*), domestic workers employed for less than four days a week are, in theory, entitled to paid sick leave and vacation days. Moreover, labour law requires employers to continue paying domestic workers when they cancel a cleaning appointment. These employment rights should also extend to irregular migrants. However, they are frequently violated, as the “no work, no pay” practice remains widespread.

Legal irregularity or a precarious and temporary status, along with resulting dependence on employers – often amplified by family responsibilities and debt – are key factors that may push migrant workers to tolerate or accept substandard and exploitative conditions. In some cases, debt accumulation stems from prohibitive visa-related fees. The absence of secure reporting mechanisms and the isolation inherent to domestic work further exacerbate vulnerability. At the same time, limited knowledge of the host country’s language affects workers’ understanding of their rights and available protections, as well as their awareness of key local support actors and organisations.

These dynamics are exacerbated in the case of live-in workers, where irregular and precarious conditions combine with significant physical isolation and dependence on employers. In such contexts, workers may face further rights violations, including restricted access to food and freedom of movement, as well as the use of passport confiscation or withheld wages as tools of control. The fear of losing their job – often the only means of securing or maintaining legal status – or of being deported prevents many from attempting to escape these situations.

For example, I-CLAIM research in Italy documents cases where workers recalled that their employers provided only minimal food, restricted access to hot water and electricity, and subjected them to constant surveillance. Despite these conditions, some workers endured the situation in order to obtain a residence permit, for instance, through the 2020 regularisation programme. As one Georgian worker explained:

“That’s the situation I’m working in, because I needed a residency and a contract” (Georgian domestic worker, Italy, in Marchetti and Lashchuk 2025, p. 9).

In the UK, cases of abuse in live-in domestic work are frequent also within diplomatic households, where employers often act with impunity. I-CLAIM research reports the case of a worker employed by a diplomatic family working from 5am to midnight without breaks or adequate food for £100 a month. When she discovered her employer had falsely declared a higher salary and raised concerns, she was threatened with deportation.

In some cases, control extends beyond the strictly work-related sphere. Research in Italy shows that, for some domestic workers, employers dictated not only their work but also their personal lives – through constant surveillance, monitoring phone calls, and commenting on women workers’ clothing. Several participants also reported gender-specific violence, including unwanted touching, verbal harassment, and control over their behaviour and appearance.

Given the isolation and limited oversight of private households, which often fall beyond the reach of labour inspections, and the inherent power imbalance between employers and domestic workers – exacerbated by many migrants’ irregular or precarious status – there is a high risk of escalating physical and psychological violence, coercion, and severe exploitation, including cases of trafficking.

2.5. Precarities related to health and safety

Domestic work is both physically and emotionally demanding and entails considerable health and safety risks, especially in undeclared or irregular employment contexts.

Work hazards in this sector include exposure to toxic chemicals, heavy lifting, and physical and verbal assault by employers, patients, or their family members. Other hazards include a lack of rest and food, and exhausting working rhythms. Cleaners and domestic workers in Finland reported that they were given inadequate time to complete their work, and that haste increased the risk of injury. Indeed, home cleaning companies typically allocate a minimum amount of time for each task, which must be recorded in an electronic system, and travel time is often unpaid. Time for eating and resting is minimal.

In the case of domestic workers, they are required to guarantee a round-the-clock presence, yet this presence is devalued and rendered invisible. As one domestic worker in UK research emphasised: “You are always working, even when they say you are not” (Sigona et al., 2025, p. 11).

Just as in previous dimensions, these dynamics are exacerbated in live-in domestic work, where the boundaries between work and life are extremely blurred, as is highlighted in the I-CLAIM research in Italy, where many live-in domestic workers essentially work 24 hours a day with little or no rest.

The isolation and alienation experienced by many migrant workers, particularly those who live in with their employers, can have serious implications for their mental health. These effects are exacerbated in cases of irregular status, which constitute an additional source of anxiety and stress. As I-CLAIM research in the Netherlands has highlighted, when employers are aware of a worker’s irregular status, workers may fear that this knowledge could be used against them or that they might be reported to the authorities, even if this does not actually occur.

They know [that I do not have documents] but this is also a bit, uh, stressful because you think all the time if they call IND, police or whatever. But because of that, I went to the people that I know. I was like, I want to be sure that you know that person. Yeah. And they know my situation (Iranian domestic worker, the Netherlands, in Hajer & van Liempt 2025: 11).

Migrant domestic workers are often aware of how to access medical care and health services, thanks to the support of local organisations and NGOs that provide legal advice, as well as informal community networks and local institutions, including churches.

However, participants’ experiences of accessing public or private healthcare, as well as health-related rights and benefits, vary greatly depending on their residence status and employment situation. Those who are undocumented or in precarious legal situations are the most affected. An emblematic case that emerged from the research in Italy was that of a migrant domestic worker who developed breast cancer and underwent treatment, including surgery and chemotherapy. However, she was unable to obtain disability benefits due to delays in renewing her residency permit. This blocked her access to benefits, putting her under additional financial strain during her illness. She had to return to work immediately after being discharged from the hospital in order to support herself and her mother, who was also undergoing cancer treatment in Italy.

2.6. Precarities related to housing

Housing insecurity emerged as a major concern among nearly all domestic workers participating in the I-CLAIM research across the four countries. This insecurity largely stems from their irregular or precarious migration status, compounded by poverty and the low income associated with this type of work, which complicates access to formal housing. Racial discrimination and prejudices also restrict their access to housing (Merikoski and Näre 2025).

In the Netherlands, for instance, many undocumented migrant workers – excluded from most public provisions and services—depend on informal housing arrangements, such as subletting rooms or apartments, without any tenant protection. In such cases, losing their job often means being unable to pay rent and ultimately losing their housing (Hajer et al., 2025). Such precarious living situations often result in

frequent relocations and a higher risk of falling victim to scams, not to mention noticeably high rent costs. Some irregular migrant domestic workers in the Netherlands are homeless. Other workers are part of the LVV shelter programme, a national initiative implemented locally in Utrecht through collaboration between the municipality and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The programme provides accommodation, legal and personal guidance, pocket money, and access to various services.

In Italy, housing insecurity also poses a major obstacle for migrant workers seeking to regularise their status. Obtaining a residence permit for work requires both proof of a work contract and of adequate housing. Many live-in domestic workers reported that even when they managed to convince their employer to provide a contract, it was almost impossible to obtain the hospitality (*ospitalità*) document proving they lived with the employer. Since this document is mandatory for the residence permit, women are often forced to find alternative solutions. Brokers frequently offer such services, rarely for free, and some women reported paying intermediaries for fraudulent contracts or to rent an address for registration.

The precarious nature of live-in workers' employment, particularly when working with elderly people, often also means that they lose both their job and their housing when their employer passes away or moves to a care facility.

In addition to the difficulty of securing housing, it should be noted that migrant domestic workers often stay in poor and inadequate accommodation. In the UK, for instance, some participants lived in shared, employer-controlled housing, which lacked privacy and was subject to monitoring. One participant in particular was housed in multiple temporary accommodations, some of which were infested with rats. Other workers living in asylum accommodation or awaiting legal decisions experienced similar forms of control. One participant described being housed with strangers, denied access to cooking facilities, and treated "like a number." When she complained about being locked in by her host family, she was told it was "better than being homeless" (Sigona et al. 2025, p. 12).

More broadly, housing often serves as a tool of control, whether through employer-provided accommodation or temporary asylum housing. Access to shelter is used to extract labour, enforce silence, and ensure compliance, thereby further entrenching workers' irregular status.

2.7. Resistance from migrant workers, (lack of) mobilisation/unionisation of workers

Despite the isolation and vulnerabilities associated with their irregular status, and the time constraints imposed by their exhausting work schedules, migrant domestic workers often engage in activism, show solidarity with each other, and provide informal mutual support. This demonstrates their agency, showing that they are not merely victims, but strategists, advocates and survivors. They navigate bureaucracies, resist abuse, support one another, and claim space for dignity and rest. As one domestic worker in the UK emphasised:

We didn't come here to beg. We came to work, to live, to be treated like people (Sigona et al., 2025: 17).

For instance, in Italy, some migrant domestic workers became active in informal support networks after witnessing the exploitation and invisibility faced by other migrants. Others, after years of precarious domestic work, transitioned into formal roles supporting migrants, for example taking part in reception and mentoring initiatives for people fleeing the war in Ukraine and later contributing to integration projects.

Trade unions and migrant associations have also played a crucial role across all four I-CLAIM countries. In the Netherlands, for instance, the FNV Migrant Domestic Workers Union, founded and led by migrant domestic workers, many of whom are undocumented, has been central in advocating for the recognition of domestic work as legitimate labour and for the regularisation of undocumented workers. The union also campaigns for rights such as holiday pay, access to bank accounts, and city IDs, while promoting awareness and empowerment through Dutch language classes and theatre initiatives. A similar form of grassroots organising is found in the UK, where the Nanny Solidarity Network operates as a branch of the Independent Worker's Union of Great Britain.

3. Delivery work in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany and Poland

Ilse van Liempt (Utrecht University)

Food delivery has become an essential, if marginal, entry point in the European labour market for migrants facing legal and structural barriers in formal employment. It is marketed as flexible and accessible, but in reality it is regulated and controlled by algorithms of platforms and indirectly also through migration policies. The work itself offers opportunities for migrants who are confronted with limited access to the formal labour market. At the same time the recruitment of migrants who have recently arrived in a country and whose legal status is insecure can also be framed as strategic exploitation of individuals who are inexperienced and with strong aspirations to enter the labour market. How to secure migrant workers' rights in this sector?

3.1. Policy and legal framework of the delivery work sector in Poland, Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands

Research on delivery work in all four I-CLAIM countries identifies the unregulated nature of the platform sector as shaping workers' conditions. It is striking that most discussions on the labour question in platform work fails to recognize the interplay between the platform economy and migration regimes. The substantial share of migrants involved in platform work is however increasingly reflected in recent research on the sector (ILO 2021, van de Venne & van Roelen 2024), including in the food delivery sector (Altenried 2024, van Doorn 2023, van Doorn et al. 2023, Gebrial 2024, Mendonça et al. 2023). And there is attempts to regulate the sector at the EU level under the EU Platform Work Directive as well as ILO frameworks.

In all countries where delivery work was studied the question around employment status and social protection is key to the way the sector operates. Should platforms employ workers, or facilitate self-employment? In the Netherlands it has been decided that self-employment is no longer allowed for any food delivery platform after a court case⁸ against Deliveroo. Self-employment excludes them from core employment protection. In the United Kingdom a similar court case, in the same year, against Deliveroo resulted in the opposite where food delivery workers are not qualified as employees (and are therefore not entitled to trade union rights)⁹. The fact that they are classified as flexible workers means they are allowed to work as self-employed. The substitution clause, a contractual provision allowing food delivery workers to send someone else to work in their place, moreover allows delivery workers in the UK to share accounts with others (Worker Info Exchange 2023). In Poland fleet partners or application partners play a central role in the organization of platform work. They formalize agreements with couriers, handle the payments and take on some of the formal obligations required by local legislation. In practice most couriers in Poland are neither self-employed nor employed under labour law and have an in-between status (Homel & Grzymala-Kazłowska 2025). In Germany a similar concern around intermediaries is present. Since the establishment of the platform economy to the German market, trade unions have been lamenting working conditions and precarious circumstances. To a point in which trade union workers talk about “criminal underlying structures

⁸ <https://www.debrauw.com/articles/dutch-supreme-court-delivers-landmark-decision-deliveroo-riders-are-employees>

⁹ [Supreme Court decision on Deliveroo riders: more clarity for the gig economy | Practical Law](#)

of businesses through sub-companies and intermediaries who hire migrants upon arrival on illegal basis” (Salamena 2025).

Apart from labour law it is important to take migration law into account as well. Since 2025 the Labour government in the UK has introduced more rigorous rights to work checks and daily biometric ID verifications as well as restrictions on account and device sharing (Home Office & Cooper 2025), making it not so easy in practice for workers with a migration background to be self-employed. In the wider context of ‘a crackdown on illegal working’, migration control is now explicitly embedded in the digital infrastructure of platform labour. Controls have moved from online to offline spaces.

3.2. Precarities related to access to the sector

Delivery work is one of the sectors where migrants without the right to work find employment in. Restrictive migration regimes make it difficult for workers to get access to work permits and as such prevent people from getting access to labour markets. Delivery work can be framed as part of a so-called arrival infrastructure (Meeus et al. 2019) for newcomers. The apps in itself are part of this infrastructure as they provide access to work. Friends and acquaintances might help to support access to the apps and thus to the opportunity to work and earn an income. Nearly all workers interviewed in the countries under study found it relatively easy to sign up with a platform and could easily start working straight away. In most cases there is no qualifications needed to start the job.

Interviews with workers however showed that for some it is easier than for others and that there are changes in relation to immigration enforcement who explicitly target platform workers. Getting access to an account in theory is relatively easy as the majority of the work is done in anonymity. But not speaking English or the local language might be an obstacle, as well as not having a bank account. In Poland Just Eat Takeaway requires the knowledge of Polish language.

In the Netherlands staffing agencies are officially getting involved in the onboarding process since January 2025 to register people and check their IDs making the work environment less anonymous and therefore less accessible for migrants with precarious legal status because people need to show ID and have a bank account.

We start the onboarding after an ID check, bank accounts and a visit will be paid to people’s home address for another ID check. They check if the person who subscribed is the person who lives there. And then they can start their first shift (expert interview in the Netherlands with platform provider in Van Liempt & Hajer 2025: 9)

In practice the transition to the new system is however taking time.

We did not transfer all accounts at the same time, because that is impossible. We take it step by step. And there is the issue that people want to keep their account, with their reviews. We are working on that (expert interview in the Netherlands with platform provider, in Van Liempt & Hajer 2025: 8).

Third party hiring is common in all other countries under study. Most often riders are hired through acquaintances who already work as riders or through co-national or other intermediaries from which it might be assumed that they work for sub-companies. In Germany third-party riders are often ‘leased’ to

Lieferando or Wolt during high seasons. After the seasons, contracts are then easily terminated without any pre-notice. As one rider described:

I just received an email on 30th of April that was saying we are no longer hiring you, because our contract with Lieferando has ended. So, I was shocked. I was about to work in Lieferando for a year and I am getting an email that you are not working from next day. So that was very shocking really for me". (Indian delivery worker, Germany, in Salamena 2025: 9)

With regard to dependencies on others, the Polish report illustrates that some so called fleet partners (companies and firms) exploit existing loopholes to increase their profits at the cost of workers' rights (Homel & Grzymala-Kazłowska 2025). The British case also shows that workers without the right to work are often dependent on others to get access to accounts of food delivery platforms to work on. In the British context working on somebody else's account is still tolerated under the substitution clause but in practice it is being challenged and there even is a regulatory effort around it.

3.3. Precarities related to payment

Delivery work does not pay well. Most people earn less than minimum wage, especially the ones who are dependent on others for the payment. If people work on other people's accounts and are dependent on others for the payment it makes them vulnerable. Precarities related to payment involve negotiations around payment with owners of accounts. Workers without the right to work often have no access to bank accounts which increases their dependency on others and increases the risk of not being paid or being paid less than they have the right to.

The Dutch report paid explicit attention to cases where people did not get paid for the work they did. A 20 year old Nigerian delivery worker who was interviewed in Utrecht for example stated:

I worked for 2 months and they did not pay me nothing. Nothing. (Nigerian delivery worker, the Netherlands, in van Liempt & Hajer 2025: 8)

Fairwork, a NGO that fights against labour exploitation, supports workers who want to claim their wages back (Fairwork 2025). However, there are a lot of hurdles involved in this process. Lawyers often think the amount of money involved is too low to start a case, it is difficult to prove that people were not paid when there is no contract and the Dutch Labour Inspectorate puts priority with fining employers instead of protecting workers. The Belgian Labour Inspectorate's work practices are called upon as a best practice by several experts across the countries. When they discover workers who are exploited they do not only fine the employer but also support workers to get access to any unpaid salaries.

3.4. Precarities related to access to rights for delivery workers

The systemic precarity within the sector, combined with tight migration systems where it is almost impossible to secure stable legal status even when one has a job, is perpetuating more insecurity and precarity. In none of the countries studied delivery work is sufficient ground for regularization.

The I-CLAIM research on delivery work showed that workers in none of the countries under study are sufficiently informed about their rights and have little access to information on their rights. More specifically

for workers without the right to work, claiming rights is complicated because of fear for authorities. Access to institutional support is minimal in all countries under study.

Interviews show that the work does not only affect migrant's financial situations but also their personal and family lives. An Eastern European delivery worker with two small children explains:

I work every day, 10 hours a day, sometimes even 16, and I still can't make ends meet. I earn 5.000 Zloty [1700 Euro] and he earns 13.000 Zloty [3000 Euro]. And I feel like my hands are tied, because I have more responsibilities. I have to devote myself to my family (Eastern European delivery worker, Poland, in Homel & Grzymala-Kazlowska 2025:14)

3.5. Precarities related to health and safety as well as mental health risks

Food delivery work is a risky job. Flexibility means that there is no maximum amount of hours people work and it is a job that often involves late night shifts. Working long and irregular hours increases the risk of getting injured. Many workers we spoke to reported slipping with the bike, falling in front of the tram or other traffic accidents. Physical exhaustion is a serious health risk involved, as well as the cold.

Your hands are not working at -5 C, you know? Believe me, I wear four pair of socks, when I come out, four pair of socks, three trousers and up to the trousers I wear two waterproof trousers, right? And then a jacket and another jacket (delivery worker, the UK, in Sigona et al. 2025: 11)

Food delivery work is also a lonely job where people work very much in isolation. The moments of socializing are limited to moments when delivery workers wait for orders outside restaurants and when they wait for new orders. Some people suffer from the loneliness. Like a Brazilian worker who explained that he felt so lonely he was considering going back to Brazil.

I can't communicate with anyone. I go to places and I feel like an empty guy, with nothing (Brazilian delivery worker, the Netherlands, in van Liempt & Hajer 2025: 11).

In all countries workers complained about the fact that the physicality of the work was wearing them out and all workers suffer from unhealthy and unsafe working conditions that make them feel exhausted and at high risk of accidents. For couriers who are studying it is very difficult to prioritize successfully completing the study while working under so much pressure. There is also a lack of job security which increases the stress.

I wish I had an office working student job, on the bike, I think, how can I get more orders? (Pakistani delivery worker, Germany, in Salamena 2025: 8).

Interviews with food delivery workers revealed discrimination involved in the job, customers might respond in a racist way when they interact at the door, but some workers are also suffering from ethnic profiling and identity checks by the police more often than others.

with the lighter-skinned couriers, you speak to them sometimes.. you hear that 'oh no, I don't have this problem of being stopped'. But I have a friend who also works as a courier, he's black, he's South African, and he's been stopped quite a few times ..they might think he is suspicious (African delivery worker, Poland, in Homel & Grzymala-Kazlowska 2025" 15)

In no country under study there were physical places available for workers to wait, rest, get access to rights. In other countries like in France there are examples of places set up for delivery workers to rest, like the Maison des Couriers in Paris, the Cara Rider in Bologna or the Sosta Rider network of 21 places in Torino. This place located in the centre of Paris offers free legal and administrative services as well as practical amenities such as coffee, tea, food, a microwave, plugs for charging phones and bike batteries, toilets, showers and a place to repair bikes.

3.6. Precarities related to housing and transportation to work

Even though the profile of workers differed largely throughout I-CLAIM country studies all participants in one way or the other suffered from financial precarity. It is difficult to financially manage on your own when you are dependent on this type of work, and even harder when there is a family involved. The migration journey for many had resulted in loans that had to be repaid and for some additional costs related to migration procedures or studies abroad topped up the loans related to border crossing. Being dependent on insecure employment makes people financially even more vulnerable, especially when the job insecurity is combined with high costs of living in the city and transport costs involved in commuting from remote housing locations to the city for work.

Berlin, Utrecht, Birmingham and Warsaw are expensive cities to live in. It is difficult to find affordable housing and many end up in shared apartments in poor quality housing. Insurance costs a lot of money and not being insured results in additional costs for healthcare and for material loss such as when bikes are stolen or need to be repaired. Food delivery is for most workers not a preferred option but a fallback in the face of exclusion from more stable forms of employment. The sector has transitioned from an innovation driven model to one reliant on disposable migrant and racialized labour.

3.7. Resistance from migrant workers: Mobilisation and unionization of workers

In all I-CLAIM countries where delivery work was studied, trade unions try to advance labour struggles in the sector but are only successful to a certain degree. Delivery workers are not unionized to a large extent because many of them are newly immigrants with limited access to information on what the union landscape looks like and in case they are self-employed they cannot formally unionise. The platform economy in general hinders workers mobilization through the lack of transparency regarding contracting parties and employers and the continuous pressure on employees. Moreover, the job is highly individualized with limited opportunities for collective action making it difficult to change working condition violations. Delivery workers with precarious migration statuses might also be scared to become members of formal institutions because it involves registration and even payment whereas many don't have a bank account.

Unions do try to advance delivery worker's rights. In Poland Pyszne.pl and Glovo riders' union have organized protests and boycotts concerning payment policies and the improvement of working conditions. In the Netherlands the court case against Deliveroo was initiated by the FNV (The Federation of Dutch Trade Unions) and made huge impact in the sense that Deliveroo was requested to employ their workers and not work with self-employed workers anymore. Since this court case workers are hired through staffing agencies and are entitled to employee rights like sickness pay and are protected against dismissal. After the court case the trade unions in the Netherlands have gone relatively quiet on delivery work. In Germany the trade unions for Food, Beverage and Hospitality is actively involved in advancing labour struggles in the delivery sector. In Germany one grassroots movement gained a lot of public attention and made impact with their online campaign 'Liefern am Limit' (Delivering at the Limit) which started in 2017/2018 as an activist campaign but has become a trade union campaign over the years.

4. Conclusion

The three sectors under study are all characterised by widespread undeclared work, weak labour rights protection, and exploitative practices. Their specific features - such as invisibility, flexibility, isolation, limited rights protection, and fragmented enforcement - combined with visa dependency and the criminalisation of irregular migration, create a structural context that undermines workers' bargaining power and enables various forms of exploitation. At the same time, precisely because of their "invisible" and informal nature, these sectors also represent the main areas where many migrant workers in irregular or precarious situations can find employment opportunities and, in this sense, function as entry and "refuge" sectors. It was even found that migrant workers sometimes move between the three "refuge" sectors we studied, frequently shifting between different forms of undeclared work and exploitation. The research, for example, highlights several cases of workers who moved from agriculture to domestic work, or from platform delivery jobs (*riders*) to domestic work, and vice versa.

Across the three sectors studied, migrant workers hold diverse legal statuses (for instance, residence permits for work reasons, residence permits for family reunification, asylum seekers, EU citizens). A large variety in levels of dependency and precarity were found, often linked to the variety in legal status. However, regardless of their status, all have experienced forms of undeclared work and exploitation, which are rooted in the different forms of vulnerabilities linked to workers' legal and social conditions. For those holding temporary work permits, a key issue is their strong dependency on the employer, on whom their legal status depends.

A wide range of actors — from personal contacts and community networks to informal brokers and recruitment agencies — play a crucial role in facilitating the recruitment and work of migrant workers in these sectors, often exploiting the vulnerabilities generated by existing migration laws and policy frameworks. The role of the trade union is limited, with a few exceptions like the migrant domestic worker group that is active in the Dutch trade union. There are significant obstacles to unionization such as language barriers, cultural differences, the often informal and fragmented nature of migrant's employment and workers' lack of awareness of labour rights. Still, trade unions play a critical role in denouncing labour exploitation and advancing equal treatment. The challenges faced by unions when it comes to irregularised migrant workers should be understood within the broader regulatory and policy landscape. The evidence emerging from the above mentioned sectors resonates with ongoing policy debates across Europe and beyond on how to regulate new and informal forms of work, how to safeguard the rights of those in precarious situations, and how to strengthen decent working conditions for all workers.

By including specific provisions to improve the conditions of migrants in a precarious situation in initiatives such as the Fair Labour Mobility Package and the Quality Jobs Roadmap the situation could be improved. Measures limiting subcontracting and ensuring the regulation of labour intermediaries would be particularly helpful, as these practices often sustain exploitation and blur responsibility in the sectors studied. Similarly, the review of European Labour Authority's mandate holds significant potential. Extending its scope to cover not only mobile but migrant workers, and ensuring access to safe and effective complaint mechanisms emerge as crucial reforms in light of the growing interplay between EU laws on labour mobility and migration.

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Funded by the European Union under Grant Number 101094373. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency or UK Research and Innovation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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