



PRIME

Protecting Irregular
Migrants in Europe

Comparing the working activities and conditions of irregularised migrants: Evidence from Austria, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the UK

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PRIME

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Abstract

This report examines the living and working conditions of irregularised migrants across five European countries (Austria, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and the UK) and four sectors of work (agriculture and food processing, restaurants, elder care, and waste management). Drawing on over 200 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2024 and 2025, the study utilises a three-dimensional comparative framework to analyse the impact of work sectors, legal status, and national institutional contexts on the lives of irregularised migrants. While there is a wealth of research on specific sectors of work, individual country contexts, and legal statuses, our contribution is in analysing these dynamics in comparative perspective. The findings reveal a striking convergence in the lived realities of workers despite differing national labour, welfare and migration regimes. Across all sectors, migrant workers face a continuum of exploitation, characterized by wage theft, excessive hours, and hazardous environments without adequate safety training. A reliance on intermediaries, ranging from temporary work agencies to informal brokers, often renders the actual employer an invisible figure and facilitates scams that lead to further irregularisation. Sector-specific insights include: (i) the prevalence of intense physical demands and employer-controlled housing or informal camps in agriculture/food processing, used as a tool for coercion; (ii) the restaurant sector serving as an entry point, including for overqualified students and asylum seekers working back-of-house roles in breach of visa limits; (iii) the high incidence of isolation and physical and/or sexual harassment in the elder care sector, particularly in live-in arrangements where residency is tied to the employer, as well as racism and heavy workload in institutional care homes; (iv) despite waste management being a highly regulated sector overall, there is still significant ad-hoc, hidden work undertaken by irregularised migrants, particularly at night or in isolated settings. The report highlights that irregularity is a condition imposed by restrictive policies to inform migration governance across national settings, in which (illicit) intermediaries serve a fundamental role. While migrant workers across legal statuses express a desire to strengthen their status, there is a pervasive sense of entrapment and an inability to escape the dire working and living conditions.

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Introduction

Irregularised migrants, defined in this study as individuals residing in a country without the legal right to stay, constitute a vital part of the workforce in many European economies. Estimates suggest that between 3 and 4 million workers are without legal rights to reside in Europe (PICUM 2023), a substantial proportion of whom are believed to work in low-paid and labour-intensive sectors including agriculture, hospitality, and domestic work (FRA 2021). The term ‘irregular’ is now widely used in reference to individuals who reside in a place without legal status, following decades of advocacy to end the use of dehumanising terminology such as ‘illegal’ or ‘alien’. While the term ‘undocumented’ is often used interchangeably with ‘irregular’ to describe individuals without the legal right to reside or work in a country (PICUM 2023), in our experience many individuals do have ‘documents’, just not necessarily the kinds of documents required of them. In this study we refer to individuals residing in a place without legal status as ‘irregularised’ individuals. This term emphasises the power dynamics inherent to the construction of irregularity, making explicit that migration control policies and states outrightly impose this condition on individuals, perpetuating the exclusion of populations for whom legal migration pathways are limited (De Genova 2002; Ambrosini 2013; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019; Sigona and van Liempt 2025).

While this study does not explicitly analyse national political dynamics or migrants’ views on domestic politics, it is important to situate its findings within a broader European context of increasingly restrictive and hostile migration environments. Across Austria, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and the UK, the growing influence of right-wing, anti-migrant parties has coincided with policy agendas centred on limiting irregular migration, forming a shared backdrop against which migrant workers report similar experiences of insecurity and constrained agency despite differing institutional settings. Although there appears to be a pattern of experiences of exploitation and abuse of irregularised migrant workers in specific sectors throughout Europe, research has highlighted notable differences in the experiences of work among irregularised migrants between countries and across industries (Marchetti & Triandafyllidou 2017). Little is understood, however, about how and why experiences of work among irregularised migrants differ between sectors of work and national contexts; nor about how experiences of foreign workers with varying degrees of migration status differ within sectors of work. Seeking to address this gap, this study asks the following questions: Across diverse national contexts and in different sectors of work, what factors shape irregularised migrants’ access to work opportunities? What are their working conditions, and how do these conditions impact upon personal and family lives of irregularised migrants? In this study, we use a three-dimensional comparative framework to build an understanding of work among irregularised migrants: a topic that remains widely considered not only an ‘illegal’ practice in many contexts but also highly politicised and contested throughout Europe.

Studying the working lives of irregularised migrants in comparative perspective

In this study, we draw on a three-dimensional comparative framework to build an understanding of variation in the working and family lives of irregularised migrants in Europe. First, we are interested in understanding the **extent to which sector of work matters** for the kinds of conditions irregularised migrants face. With this in mind, we include in our study the experiences of work in sectors that have been referred to as “migrant-attracting labor market structures” (Bloemraad 2013: 34), namely, elder care, agriculture and food processing, restaurants, and waste management. Second, we compare the experiences of those who lack a **legal status of stay** with those who have documents authorising both stay and work, and

those who have documents of stay, but without the legal right to work or work in breach of the conditions of their permit of stay. Drawing on the distinction made by Ruhs and Anderson (2010), we distinguish between three groups of participants: (1) irregularised migrants are those without the legal right to reside, nor therefore to work in a country; (2) migrants with regular status are those who have the legal right to reside and work within the constraints of their immigration status; and (3) those who have legal right to reside but work in violation of employment restrictions attached to this status are described as 'semi-regular'. While our focus is on building a comparative, empirically grounded understanding of the experiences of foreign workers without legal migration status, our research also aligns with a broad consensus in recent scholarship that rather than a static condition, (ir)regularity is experienced by many as a process which they move in and out of over time (Sigona et al. 2021). Finally, we compare these experiences **between five countries** that have different migration histories and are institutionally diverse in relation to their labour markets and welfare systems, namely, Austria, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and the UK. In seeking to understand divergence in the working lives of irregularised migrants across these contexts, we compare whether different national institutional contexts have an effect on the experiences of irregularised migrant workers.

Through this comparative frame, this study investigates irregularised migrants' **access to and conditions of work** and the **implications of this for their personal and family lives**. To understand the process and opportunities for irregularised migrants to access work, we consider their interactions with and the roles of intermediaries, social networks, and employers in this process. Beyond providing a comparative analysis of working conditions across sectors and countries, we also engage with how these experiences effect the intimate realm of their personal and family lives, offering a richer perspective on the wider implications of work on individual life strategies and trajectories. While policy makers are under obligations to implement migration controls at national levels (see Fox-Ruhs, Palme & Ruhs 2024), we draw attention to the role that states and policy makers play in allowing this to perpetuate.

We then turn to the perspectives of our interviewees to map the changes at both policy and practical levels that they believe are needed to improve their current circumstances. Centring their assessments and reflections on their experiences, we seek to make a valuable contribution to sustainable policymaking on irregularised migrants in the near future. Doing so, we underscore the extent to which (ir)regularised migrants are able to exercise choices and navigate their work environments. This recognition of agency, however, coexists with an acknowledgement of the formidable structural constraints they face. These constraints span from legal impediments and the scarcity of social safeguards to the lurking spectre of potential exploitation. Spotlighting both agency and constraints underscores the intricate tapestry of decision-making processes that unfold within boundaries set by systemic limitations. Building on growing attention to de-centring migration studies research (Kosnick 2021; Triandafyllidou 2022; Zardo and Wolff 2022; Bashir 2023; Levitt 2023), we are also attentive to the normative assumptions of what constitutes 'acceptable' or 'exploitative' work, and the spectrum between the two. We therefore seek to understand how irregularised migrants evaluate their own conditions, and the perspectives they have on the changes needed to bring about better working conditions for irregularised migrants in different institutional contexts.

What we already know about irregularised migrant work in Europe

The challenging conditions facing irregularised migrant workers in Europe have been widely documented for many years, although research has tended to cluster around the sectors of agriculture and domestic work (Taylor 1992; Cox 1997, 2006; Anderson 2000, 2007; Lutz, and Palenga-Möllnbeck 2011; Fiałkowska and Matuszczyk 2020; Duszczyc and Matuszczyk 2022; Guidi and Berti 2023; Klakla et al. 2023; Palumbo 2024). These conditions include, *inter alia*, abuse, deception, wage withholding, lack of contracts, excessive unpaid overtime, confiscation of ID documents, dangerous work environments, and harassment. There is growing acknowledgement that conditions such as these are not exceptional, but form part of a structural continuum characterised by an increasing level of unfair treatment, deprivation of rights and restriction of personal autonomy (Palumbo 2022). However, less attention has been given to structural factors leading to differences in challenging working conditions and experiences, including different institutional frameworks, policies, and legislation that may or may not affect the conditions of irregularised migrant workers (Corrado et al. 2018; Fox-Ruhs, Palme and Ruhs 2025).

Individual characteristics play an important role in shaping (irregularised) migrants' conditions and vulnerabilities (Hennerby and McLaughlin 2017), both directly and indirectly in interaction with migration status (Giammarinaro 2022). Irregularised workers with different ethnic backgrounds face different degrees of (in)visibility and discrimination (Magazzini 2021; De Genova 2017). While gender has been explored specifically in relation to the sectors of agriculture (Palumbo and Sciarba 2018), the sex industry (Schrover et al. 2008), and domestic work (Cox 2006; Andrijasevic 2014, Triandafyllidou 2013), there is scant analysis of the conditions facing irregularised migrants in restaurants, food processing, or waste management. In relation to accessing work, a rich literature has highlighted the central role of intermediaries (informal networks, individuals or support systems) both in facilitating mobility and enabling livelihoods, often based on familial or community ties (Bonizzoni & Fresnoza-Flot, 2023; Faist et al 2021), and with a focus on social networks, migration industries, and transnational brokerage systems (Ambrosini, 2017). Again, however, we know little about how these avenues of access differ across sectors of work or national context.

Finally, very little is understood about the family lives of irregularised migrants (Van Liempt and Bilger 2018). There remains a pervasive assumption among policymakers that irregularised migrants are predominantly single young men or women who move as individuals (Stock 2023). This is despite standing evidence demonstrates that a significant proportion of irregularised migrants both travel with children, and support family members in many different parts of the world (Sigona and Hughes 2012; Mingot 2020). The ways that work interacts with the personal and family lives of irregularised migrants, and shapes forms of kinship and family relations, remains under theorised.

The report proceeds as follows. We first outline our methodology, that included complex data collection among foreign workers in our specific study sectors and countries. We then turn to the characteristics of each sector, analysing how access to work and conditions of work varied across countries and migration statuses. We then present findings on the implications of work for personal and family lives, before turning to a discussion of how irregularised migrants navigate everyday survival across sectors. We conclude with recommendations made by our interviewees, upon which we expand to explore potential avenues of change in the working lives of migrants in Europe.

Methodology

This report is based on a comparative dataset of over 200 semi-structured interviews conducted between March 2024 and April 2025 with migrants working in four sectors across five European countries (see Table 1). The countries were selected based on their different institutional regimes according to standard classifications provided by existing comparative political economy, welfare state and care regimes literature (Hall and Soskice 2001; Schroeder 2009; Simmons et al. 2024). Differences in state migration policies, welfare regimes and labour market characteristics (including the degree to which the sectors are parts of the “grey” economy in the given country) allow us to analyse how the conditions and vulnerabilities of irregular migrants vary across national institutional contexts. We expect countries with little state intervention, a liberal economy and a liberal (commodified) care regime to provide relatively more access to the labour market coupled with higher levels of exploitation of irregularised migrant workers. In contrast, in countries with stronger state intervention and labour market regulations employers are more limited in their ability to use flexible or low-paid contractual arrangements, which in turn reduces the demand for migrant labour in general and irregularised migrant labour in particular (Marino and Keizer 2023). In our study countries, we might expect to find more irregularised migrant workers in low-paid, precarious positions in countries that are characterised by a flexibilization and deterioration of working conditions in general, such as the UK or Poland (with its liberal economy and means-tested public support) rather than in Sweden or Austria. Italy falls somewhere in between, with its receding welfare state, the liberalisation of the labour market, and the deterioration of workers’ rights in the past 15 years.

All participants were over 18 years old and had at least half a year of experience working in the current country of residence. The majority of interviewees working in one of the PRIME countries for around 2 to 5 years, up to a maximum of 10 years. Out of our sample of 232 migrants, over 100 interviewees have experienced an irregularised status at some stage of their stay. Together with those interviewees who have a semi-regular status they make up 2/3 of the researched population sample (see Table 2). Primarily those who experienced irregularisation were individuals who had overstayed their travel documents (as tourists, students and workers), rather than individuals who had crossed borders without legal rights to work or stay.

It is important to note that while our sample is not necessarily representative of the countries of origin of foreign workers, it does mirror the trajectory of racial dynamics of irregularised work in each study country. For instance, in the UK, Brexit created a vacuum following the departure of EU workers, which has increasingly been filled by a non-EU workforce. In Italy, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified demand for “essential” workers especially in agriculture and care; in the agricultural sector, for example, EU nationals from Eastern Europe moved into more qualified occupations or left Italy’s rural areas, labour needs were initially met through the “refugeeisation” of the workforce and, more recently, through a growing demand of workers from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, mainly entering Italy via the quota system¹. In Poland, the Russian invasion of Ukraine coupled with declining working age population and reluctance of local workers to take jobs in ‘difficult’ working environments with low pay similarly produced a shift in the workforce especially in care and agriculture. In Austria, EU workers

¹ See: <https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/cittadini-non-comunitari-in-italia-anno-2024/>

from Eastern European countries, alongside more recent arrivals from Ukraine, continue to constitute the majority of the workforce in low paid and entry level positions, especially in agriculture. In Sweden, it was not possible to access fieldwork in the agriculture and food processing sectors, so no sample is discussed here, and we have few interviews in waste management. Existing literature clearly shows that particularly agriculture is a highly racialised sector, like in the other analysed countries, with female Thai wild berry pickers representing the most extensively studied example (and long-lasting) (Shiryian 2025).

Table 1. Total number of interviews with migrants, including their gender, per study country

Focus country	Male	Female	Total number of interviews
Austria	41	14	55
Italy	31	15	46
Poland	27	35	62
Sweden	9	5	14
UK	28	27	55
TOTAL	136	96	232

Table 2. Migrants' experiences of (multiple) statuses of stay per study country

Focus country	Regular status	Semi-regular status	Irregularised status	PREVIOUS irregularised status
Austria	28	21	6	11
Italy	17	14	15	10
Poland	29	29	4	6
Sweden	7	1	6	3
UK	36	3	16	6
TOTAL	121	61	47	34

The largest number of interviews were in the restaurant sector (71 interviews), and the lowest number in waste management and recycling (36 interviews), a sector that was difficult for our research teams to access in all study countries. We saw great diversity of work within each sector. For example, among interviewees in waste management, the actual work undertaken ranged from collection of waste in the street, small restaurants, or after public events and festivities; to sorting of second-hand clothes; to formal waste sorting for large waste management companies. Although agriculture and food-processing are considered as separate sectors in some of our study countries, we analyse the data from agri-food jobs together, seeing the commonalities, but also taking into consideration the particularities where they emerge. It is also important to note that most migrants with irregularised statuses from our sample worked in the agri-food or restaurant sectors. Many of those interviewed engaged in elder care-work were characterized by a semi-regular status, and those with irregularised status experiences were all, apart from in the UK, undertaking in-home care work, as opposed to work in care institutions. In the UK, we had interviewees who worked in in-home care

provided through an agency who are contracted by the local authorities, making several visits to different clients each day.

The country research teams met on a regular basis, developing the interview guide and discussing the research field challenges and findings. The teams used a variety of strategies to access the research field, including engaging with pre-existing contacts, taking part in migrant community organised events, through contacts to civil society organisations, spending prolonged periods of time in the places of work of interviewees (particularly in the restaurant and agricultural sectors) and engaging the support of interviewees to recruit other research participants. The country teams comprised researchers with diverse linguistic expertise. Interviews were conducted in the native languages of the study countries, that is English, German, Italian, Swedish and Polish, but also in Spanish, French, Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Tagalog, Turkish, Ukrainian and Russian. Due to the highly sensitive and politicised topic of this research, access to the field and research participants was extremely challenging. For this reason, our analysis in this report has to be treated as exploratory.

Data were analysed through multiple rounds of coding using Atlas.ti and NVivo. The operationalisation of working conditions proved challenging, as interviewees often held expectations and understandings of acceptable conditions that differed from those of the researchers. For example, there was a fine line between what study participants described as “hard work” and what interviewers interpreted as “exploitation.” Similarly, interviewees’ views of what constituted acceptable living conditions (when framed as part of working for the betterment of their family and future opportunities) often diverged from researchers’ assessments of those same conditions as deplorable. We tried to address this by paying attention to how research participants wanted their challenges to be portrayed and explained, rather than centring on our perspective or existing frameworks. Both during data collection and analysis, the safety and wellbeing of both participants and researchers received dedicated attention, and the project was guided by a rigorous ethics framework, overseen by an external ethics advisor and ethics committees of all participating institutions. All the names used in this report are pseudonyms chosen by the research participants, and all identifying characteristics of interviewees have been anonymised.

Sectoral characteristics of (ir)regularised migrant work

In the following discussion, we present our core findings across four different sectors, drawing out the key characteristics of access to work, working conditions, and vulnerabilities at work. Within each sectoral discussion, we address the key similarities and differences across countries, and the variation in experiences among migrant workers who are irregularised and those who are not. We then address how migrant workers navigate these circumstances, the implications they have for their personal and family lives, and their visions for possible change.

Agriculture and Food Processing

The dependence on migrant labour in the agri-food sectors in developed and advanced economies has been widely documented (among others, Palumbo, Corrado, and Triandafyllidou 2022; Milbourne and Coulson 2021; Rye and Scott 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the reliance of the sector on migrant labour, together with the

vulnerabilities of workers in the sector to exploitation (Kotsila and Argüelles 2024; Schneider and Götte 2022; Corrado and Palumbo 2021).

As Corrado and Caruso (2022) found in Italy and Spain, migration, asylum, and mobility policies, alongside sector-specific recruitment strategies, have all contributed to segmenting labour markets and shaping labour contractualisation. These frameworks, in turn, produce a workforce that is highly flexible, cost-efficient, and perpetually replenished to meet the shifting demands of agriculture and food processing industries. The intimate connection between migration and labour regimes within the sector therefore plays a critical role in shaping, facilitating, and/or restricting the entry of migrant workers as well as their working and living conditions. Our interviews across the studied² countries confirm the findings of previous studies, particularly with regarding the pervasive nature of exploitative practices. Table 3 below shows the number of interviewees within this sector per country, broken down by migration status, work status, gender and country of origin. By work status, we refer to whether the individual has a formal contract of work, or rather works informally on the basis of verbal agreements.

Table 3. Interviewees in the agriculture and food processing sectors by legal and work status, gender and country/region of origin

Focus country	Status				Work status	Country/ region of origin	Gender		TOTAL
	Regular	Semi-regular	Previous irregular	Current irregular			Male	Female	
Austria	6	9	4	-	12 informal 3 formal	Romania Ukraine India Nigeria Turkey	11	4	15
Italy	3	7	4	5	11 informal 4 formal	Senegal Gambia Nigeria Bulgaria Sri Lanka	13	2	15
Poland	2	15	1	2	15 informal 4 formal	Colombia Philippines Ukraine Mexico Argentina Nepal	9	10	19
Sweden	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
UK	8	-	1	4	12 formal	Romania East Timor Kyrgyzstan Ukraine	7	5	12
TOTAL	19	31	10	11	38 informal 23 formal		40	21	61

² The studied countries in the agri-food sector include Austria, Italy, Poland, and the UK. Due to difficulties accessing the research sites, no interviews were conducted in Sweden. In addition, no interviews were conducted in meat processing in Austria.

All of our interviewees fall within the 25–54 age group, with only a few younger participants and a few aged over 55 (particularly in the UK). Several participants in Italy and Poland previously had a regular status before falling into irregularity or semi-regularity. In Poland, some interviewees had previously worked in agriculture and/or food processing but have been counted under other sectors in this report (e.g. restaurants and elder care). Overall, the majority of interviewees work in agriculture (predominantly horticulture), with a smaller share employed in the food processing industry, specifically in meat processing (UK: poultry; Italy: pork; Poland: poultry and other).

Country differences

Across the studied countries, access to agri-food work and the conditions attached to it are shaped by how recruitment, legal status, and housing are organised. While this produces different routes into employment, exposure to exploitation is broadly similar. The UK is the most formalised entry point, with a Seasonal Worker Visa scheme largely mediated by licensed agencies that can enable more circular migration and, for visa holders, somewhat more consistent compliance with contracts (including minimum wage). However, interviewees in the UK still reported substandard, employer-controlled housing, isolation, and limited “decent work” standards (e.g., no extra pay for night shifts) alongside intimidation if concerns were raised. Temporary work agencies are particularly pervasive in Poland, often managing recruitment, paperwork, pay, and accommodation at once. While this can make jobs accessible, it also creates deep dependency and frequent abuse (passport retention, contract substitution, delayed wages, rent non-payment leading to eviction, and irregularisation). Italy combines a formal seasonal system with heavy reliance on informal intermediaries and contracting/subcontracting chains (*appalti/subappalti*). Together with a dysfunctional quota system, this restricts mobility and entrenches irregularity. Wage theft, unlawful deductions, and precarious living conditions (often informal camps) were also widely reported. Austria stood out for coercion linked to employer housing (cases in which an individual who lost their job would immediately face eviction), and very poor accommodation (cold, overcrowded container-style units). Across contexts, intense physical demands, weak, or uneven health-and-safety protection, and long hours beyond contracts were common. Workers’ ability to resist differed where unionisation and collective organising (UK and to some extent Italy) and campaigns led by NGOs (as in Austria) were visible, versus where they were largely absent (Poland), pushing workers instead toward fragile (often co-ethnic) support networks.

Prevalence of subcontracting and the role of intermediaries

The agricultural sector, alongside tourism and hospitality in Europe, is characterised by labour shortages, which governments try to mitigate through the employment of seasonal or temporary migrant workers. Despite the common reliance on subcontracting, and temporary work agencies across our study countries, the structure and impact of these systems differ significantly by country. For instance, in the UK, a formal seasonal worker visa scheme exists, with workers typically recruited through licensed agencies. Zhenya, a seasonal agricultural worker in the UK explained the process in her origin country, Kyrgyzstan:

My husband's sister told me about a company. This organisation recruits people for seasonal work in the UK, in cooperation with the Kyrgyz Ministry of Labour. All the information is posted on government websites, we trusted them,

so we had no worries about the work. First of all, you need to register. It's not easy, as the registration link is only open for one hour, and you have to make it in time. [...] The government website publishes the day and time of registration in advance. And you have to be on time. The link may close faster if the required number of people has been recruited. I filled out the form in 5 minutes. You have to enter your details very quickly. After that, you are invited to an interview. You will also be informed about the day and time of the interview in advance. [...] The interview takes place in Bishkek, our capital, at the [company's] office. We were shown a presentation about life in the UK and the specifics of working on a farm. We were also told about the requirements for applying for a visa. (Zhenya, Kyrgyz, agriculture UK, regular).

Zhenya also highlighted that the agency warned them about the prevalence of visa processing scams. However, she also shared that it was expensive to finance her migration given the related expenses such as documentary requirements and plane tickets:

The agency told us not to pay attention to the adverts about applying for a visa. Because a lot of thieves can pretend to be agencies. They can take money and not help with the visa. That's why [the company] helped us with the entire visa application process...for us, in general, it is very expensive. It's like working on a farm for three weeks. My mum helped me personally. (Zhenya, Kyrgyz, agriculture UK, regular).

Although Poland³ and Italy also have formal seasonal worker visas, both countries rely heavily on informal networks or intermediaries for recruitment of workers. As we return to below, in Italy, interviewees faced significant challenges related to *appalti* and *subappalti* (contracting and subcontracting chains). In some cases, the lack of intermediary agencies to facilitate formal recruitment, coupled with a non-functional quota-system (Ero Straniero, 2025) meant that workers from far away countries become stuck in Italy, due to limited mobility options of going back and forth. Conversely, the UK's longstanding system of recruitment agencies facilitates more circular migration.

In Poland, temporary work agencies manage contracts, salaries, accommodation and document processing. These agencies often operate transnationally, recruiting workers from abroad through 'partner' placement agencies, and redistributing them domestically. Among interviewees, this often resulted in exploitative conditions, including passport confiscation, contract substitution, and in some cases, irregularisation of workers. Interviewees shared that both temporary work agencies, and employers intentionally did not process the documents of their workers, despite asking workers to pay for the supposed document processing. Carlo, a Filipino who initially worked in a fish factory and was recruited in Taiwan together with his wife, explained how these transnational dynamics, organised through the migration industry and underpinned by migration infrastructures, connect various countries:

³ Until 2018, a simplified procedure was widely used in accessing the agricultural sector in Poland and then eventually replaced by a seasonal work permit. However, since 2022 the number of seasonal work permits issued declined significantly, which is mainly explained as the result of Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine.

Agencies there [in Taiwan] also need to have connections here [in Poland] with different agencies. So, that if someone applies there [in Taiwan], when they come here [to Poland], their connection is not just [one] agency. They have many connections. So, that if they apply - that they [intermediaries] hire applicants [workers], many [...] companies can [potentially] take them. (Carlo, Filipino, semi-regular, food processing, Poland).

Alejandro, a Colombian who also previously worked in meat processing companies in Poland, shared his confusion with regards to the intermediation arrangement he encountered, pointing to the employer as largely an 'invisible figure' throughout their working experiences:

The problem was that I don't know if the one that hired us was with an agency, I don't know if it was just an intermediary person. We never knew [...] And one day they asked us for a passport that supposedly was to ask for the work permit and they took like two three days with the passport. We never got the permit. So, we worked there for a month, a month and a week. We were paid fortnightly and the guy would take a long time to pay us. So, if we had to be paid on Friday, he would pay us until Thursday of the following week. So, all this time we were left without money, without food, he didn't care, we wrote to him, and he didn't answer us. Until once the owner of the flat where we lived arrived and told us that we had to leave that same day because the man had not paid the rent. [...] We denounced him because he had also taken our passports for a while and we had to ask him every now and then for our passports. (Alejandro, Colombian, semi-regular, food processing, Poland).

In food processing in the UK (beyond the seasonal worker visa scheme), and in Italy, interviewees reported reliance on intermediaries such as temporary work agencies to access work in the sector only when they are already in the country of work. In all studied countries however, interviewees also relied on their personal networks to connect them, either to temporary work agencies or directly to possible work opportunities. In this capacity, co-nationals acted both as formal and informal brokers and were variously perceived among interviewees as both supportive and exploitative in doing so.

In Italy, Poland, and the UK, the majority of interviewees suggested that intermediaries in the agri-food sector were the main source of "scams"⁴. Scammers were variously defined across our study countries as "fake" international recruiting agencies (UK), subcontractors (Italy), temporary work agencies (food processing), and informal intermediaries (agriculture) (Poland). Scams by intermediaries often resulted in the irregularisation of the interviewees situation at work, together with a negative impact on their chances to reside legally. In Austria and Sweden, the role of intermediaries remains less clearly defined and warrants further investigation.

Documents and the illusion of security

⁴ Here "scams" are defined by our interlocutors not only and not majorly as online scams but mostly as scams perpetuated by a variety of work and institutional/legal intermediaries in their day-to-day navigation of life in PRIME countries. For example, in Italy, multiple interviewees referred to being scammed as "being fooled" by employers, lawyers, even the bank functionaries who they depend on to secure regular job, residence permit, income.

Interviewees across countries emphasised the necessity of possessing appropriate documentation to gain access to employment. However, the degree of restrictiveness or leniency regarding documentation varies across the studied countries. For example, in Poland, some employers accept workers whose residency applications are still being processed, even though these individuals are not officially permitted to work until a red stamp in their passport confirms the legality of their stay. For those without documents, however, this means work is only accessible by borrowing the documents of someone else. Interviewees adopted various survival strategies to navigate these constraints (and opportunities) of existing immigration and labour regimes. For instance, some interviewees in the UK applied for the family reunification scheme despite knowing that they were not eligible for it, but rather in order to have a form of documentation to show when applying for work. They knew, however, that they would lose their job the moment that the application was formally rejected.

There was a strong perception among interviewees with an irregularised status that having the correct documents would solve their problems in accessing work. As Mostesta, an East Timorese working in a chicken factory in the UK, put it: *“If you don’t have legal right to remain, finding a job is really hard. But if you have the right to remain, finding a job is easy.”* (Mostesta, East Timorese, irregularised, agriculture, UK). Yet, among interviewees with regular status (and those who had the possibility of becoming regularised through work), challenges in accessing work were also widely reported. These included, for instance, spending long periods of time looking for work, the limited opportunities posed by their lack of language skills, and not managing to access work in the job or sector that they wanted and had training and skills to undertake. Similarly, having a regular migration status did not necessarily lead to better work arrangements and conditions among interviewees in the agri-food sector. Across all study countries, interviewees with a regular status consistently reported working more hours and days compared to what was written in their contracts (a notable exception was the UK, where all interviewees with regular status were employed under the Seasonal Worker Visa scheme). These workers generally reported adherence to their contractual terms, including being paid the national minimum wage. However, even in the UK, no additional compensation was provided for night shifts, revealing a baseline of minimal compliance rather than decent labour standards. In contrast, wage exploitation was a routine feature in the other countries studied. In Poland, Austria, and Italy, many interviewees reported being underpaid or not paid at all for all hours worked, particularly in irregular arrangements. In Italy and Poland, wage theft and unlawful deductions were widespread, regardless of status of stay.

Interviewees also reported enduring severe physical demands, often under dangerous or degrading conditions. Exposure to extreme heat, particularly in greenhouses and open fields during the summer, and cold (in the case of meat processing facilities) was common, and many shared having health issues resulting from prolonged work without adequate hydration or rest. The absence of mandated breaks or very short ones, along with expectations to meet high quotas under physically strenuous circumstances, contributed to the overall intensity of the labour. Those working in the food processing sector also shared their fears of permanent damage to their hands or arms after the injuries they sustained, as Amy, a Filipina interviewee in Poland, shared:

My hands swelled up. It was a chicken factory, but we worked with ducks and geese. I was assigned to the dressing area. Sometimes we had to pluck feathers manually. It was very physical. You had to remove the

feathers, and they would soak the birds in hot water first before we manually plucked them. I couldn't handle it... my hands swelled up really badly. [...] I told them I couldn't handle it anymore, and I didn't want to go back because I was afraid of permanent damage to my body, especially my hands. When I couldn't write anymore, I decided I couldn't go back. It wasn't worth it if the damage was that severe. It's okay if there's some damage, but not permanent damage (Amy, Filipino, regular, food processing, Poland).

For both sectors, where health and safety measures existed at all, they were unevenly applied and largely dependent on individual employers. Protective equipment was rarely distributed, safety procedures were not explained, and access to healthcare in the event of injury or illness was often absent or insufficient. As Jeny, a Ukrainian who previously worked on a farm in the UK, recalled:

They promised to call an ambulance, but they didn't. We had to help her ourselves, using pills. But it's not normal that people don't know where to turn for help or that there isn't even a basic blood pressure monitor on the farm. We didn't know who could provide first aid or even basic medication. (Jeny, Ukrainian, regular, agriculture, UK).

This example highlights what was widely reported among interviewees across study countries as a failure to safeguard the well-being of workers, regardless of the formal legal standards ostensibly in place.

Precarity and everyday survival

Across all countries, recruitment and temporary work agencies (and, to a certain extent in the UK, the seasonal work visa scheme), offered limited safety nets to access acceptable housing and working conditions. Workers' access to accommodation was almost entirely mediated by employers, reinforcing their dependence and constraining their ability to exit exploitative arrangements. Workers feared complaining about mistreatment due to the risk of immediate dismissal, particularly in Austria and Poland, where losing a job also meant immediate eviction from employer-provided housing. In the UK, seasonal workers employed through agencies could, under certain conditions, be reassigned if conflicts arose. Nonetheless, several interviewees described threats and even physical violence from supervisors when they raised concerns about working conditions, underscoring the limited protections available even within state-regulated visa schemes. Among the small number of women working in the sector, instances of gender-based harassment were also reported, particularly in Italy and Poland. These accounts speak to a gendered dimension of exploitation that often remains underexplored, particularly in research on the agri-food sectors.

Living conditions across the countries varied in terms of provision but were consistently described by interviewees as substandard. Employer-provided housing was common in the UK, Poland, and Austria, while in Italy, workers (who were primarily irregularised) lived in informal settlements or camps, lacking basic sanitation and infrastructure. In the UK, most seasonal workers were housed in caravans that were frequently described as mouldy, cramped, and unhygienic. With little to no transportation infrastructure, many were isolated from nearby towns, limiting access to shops, healthcare, and other services. Despite the

agency-mediated structure of employment, housing was tightly controlled by employers, making it difficult for workers to leave exploitative workplaces without risking both employment and shelter.

In Austria, employer-provided accommodation typically took the form of shipping containers or temporary units, which interviewees described as cold, overcrowded, and poorly maintained. This is also the case in Poland, where interviewees were housed in overcrowded trailer-type or hotel-style accommodations provided by employers or temporary work agencies. Multiple people often shared a single room, with limited privacy or personal space. Interestingly, some interviewees expressed a degree of acceptance or even satisfaction with these arrangements. One remarked: *“There were large [hotel] rooms, 7–8 workers in one room. And smaller rooms, there were 4 workers each... I liked the housing, it was normal”* (Lola, Ukrainian, semi-regular, agriculture, Poland). Such comments suggest that experiences and expectations regarding accommodation may be shaped by broader migration trajectories and previous migration experiences in other countries.

Despite differences in migration status, legal frameworks, and contractual arrangements, there was striking similarity in the experiences of exploitative working conditions among interviewees across all countries. As noted by Triandafyllidou and Bartolini (2020), these dynamics cannot be explained solely through migration policy and governance but must be situated within the broader labour market structures and production models that systematically reproduce precarity in the agri-food sector. These findings also underscore the persistent and systematic undervaluation of migrant labour, exacerbated by the lack of enforcement mechanisms and institutional neglect. The discrepancy between legal frameworks and on-the-ground practices illustrates the often-precarious and exploitative nature of migrant labour within the agri-food sector.

However, it must be noted that while working arrangements and labour conditions in the agri-food sector appear broadly similar across the countries studied, the presence or absence of trade union activity significantly shaped workers' experiences. In the UK and, to a certain extent, in Italy and Austria, formal collective organising through both unions and NGOs played a visible role in mitigating some of the sector's most exploitative practices, contributing to improved conditions for certain groups of workers. These cases illustrate how institutionalised forms of worker representation can, under specific circumstances, intervene in otherwise precarious labour regimes. In contrast, in Poland, there was a notable absence of reported union activity or formal collective bargaining structures, and interviewees did not identify any comparable mechanisms for challenging poor working conditions or negotiating improvements. Instead, they had to rely on mobilising (limited) personal and community-based resources (often co-ethnic networks) to endure harsh working conditions and navigate the complexities of unfamiliar and, at times, opaque migration and labour regimes.

Migrant labour remains integral to the functioning of the agriculture and food processing sectors across Europe. While subcontracting and intermediation are common across all the countries studied, the specific forms these take are shaped by each country's labour market structures and migration regimes. Both migrants and other actors navigate these complex systems, but the prevalence of such arrangements often exposes workers to heightened risks of exploitation. Contrary to the assumption that legal status ensures protection, many migrants with regular status continue to experience poor working conditions, wage theft, and limited

access to adequate housing and occupational health and safety. However, interviewees with irregularised status had to also contend with the insecurity associated with the lack of legal authorisation to stay in the country thereby making them more vulnerable to further exploitation. Although working conditions were broadly similar across contexts, the presence of trade unions in countries such as the UK and Italy offered some avenues for collective organising and modest improvements, while in Poland, the absence of such mechanisms left workers dependent on informal, and often fragile, co-ethnic support networks.

Restaurants

The restaurant industry is generally considered part of the accommodation and food service activities sector (Eurostat, 2025), and is situated within the broader hospitality and tourism industries. According to the European Labour Authority Strategic Analysis (2024), migrant workers (alongside other vulnerable groups, including young and female workers) constitute a substantial share of the labour force in the Horeca sector across EU Member States, amidst persistent labour shortages in the industry. Furthermore, the report particularly noted that data from 2021 and 2022 indicate that third-country nationals (TCNs) made up nearly 80% of foreign cooks, over 70% of foreign chefs, and around two-thirds of foreign waiters employed across the EU (European Labour Authority, 2024: 35). Similar trends were found by Lucas and Mansfield (2010) in the UK where the employers in the hospitality sector increasingly turned to migrant workers to fill in staffing shortages. Given that the sector is characterised by flexibility to respond to consumer demands, the restaurant sector mostly requires seasonal workers, explaining the large allocation for workers in these sectors in countries with quota systems. While cities are less sensitive to seasonality, rural and tourist areas require a strictly seasonal foreign workforce. Unlike in the agri-food sector, there is less reliance on temporary work agencies, and interviewees mostly referred to reliance on their personal networks to find work.

Our interviewees working in the restaurant industry can be classified into four main groups, reflecting the characteristics of the sector: (1) students (especially in university towns where interviews were mainly conducted: Poland, Italy, Austria, UK), (2) asylum seekers (both those who are authorised to work and those working in breach of the conditions of their residence permit: Italy, Austria, Sweden), (3) people with family reunification visas, especially working in ethnic restaurants owned by family members or friends, and (4) fully irregularised individuals, including people who had been trafficked. It should be added that in the restaurant sector were also interviewed workers who previously worked in other sectors (particularly agriculture and food processing), as in the case of Filipino workers in Poland, or as interviewees in Sweden who also worked in care and waste management.

Across all countries, interviewees in this sector were predominantly men, and most held entry-level positions (e.g., dishwashing, cleaning, basic food preparation, customer service). A small proportion, particularly those who had lived in their country of work for more than five years (notably in the cases of Italy and the UK) were able to 'climb the ladder' to more senior roles. Although most held residence permits, the majority nonetheless faced some form of employment irregularity, including insecure or noncompliant contracts. Among them, students and asylum seekers across study countries were also working in breach of the conditions of their permits in order to avoid destitution.

Table 4. Interviewees in the restaurant sector by legal and work status, gender and country/region of origin

Focus country	Status				Work status	Country/ region of origin	Gender		TOTAL
	Regular	Semi-regular	Previous irregular	Current irregular			Male	Female	
Austria	9	8	4	2	15 informal 4 formal	Afghanistan Pakistan Chile Ghana Iran Nigeria Ukraine	17	2	19
Italy	8	4	5	4	8 informal 8 formal	Gambia El Salvador Bangladesh Cameroon Morocco Nigeria Togo Tunisia	15	1	16
Poland	10	5	3	1	11 informal 5 formal	India Nepal Pakistan Philippines Sri Lanka	14	2	16
Sweden	2	2	1	1	3 informal 2 formal	Afghanistan Colombia Peru Ukraine	3	2	5
UK	10	2	2	3	7 informal 8 formal	El Salvador Iraq Nepal Nigeria Pakistan Romania Sudan Syria Turkey	8	7	15
TOTAL	39	21	15	11	44 informal 27 formal		57	14	71

Country differences

Across the study countries, access to various types of restaurant work was typically through informal or semi-formal entry routes into “back-of-house” kitchen jobs (dishwashing, cleaning, kitchen portering), especially for students and asylum seekers who were often overqualified and pushed into on-call or part-time contracts that masked full-time hours. Irregularised workers also undertook similar roles. In the UK this was further shaped by reliance on employers for visa sponsorship. In all countries, access to work was mainly through personal contacts and social networks and having a contract for 20 hours, while in fact working between

40–70 hours per week was the norm. In Sweden, interviewees working in the restaurant sector all reported problems in accessing work. In part, this was owing to the challenges of opening a bank account in order to receive a salary⁵: *“It’s hard to get a job without a bank account. Especially now when everything is digital. Everything is done through your digital ID”* (Afghani, restaurants and care, regular). Across countries, working conditions were overwhelmingly described as challenging, including low or minimum wages topped up cash-in-hand, unpaid overtime, no reported health-and-safety training, and physically degrading work (long standing, heavy lifting, unhygienic spaces). However, some dynamics differed across countries. Sweden was the only country where regularised interviewees in the restaurant sector reported using trade unions and labour protections, while irregularised workers avoided help for fear of firing or deportation and also described racism and threats. UK interviewees emphasised co-worker support, and less racism was reported (although this is quite possibly a bias in our sample). By contrast, in Italy and Austria numerous accounts were given of supervisors shouting at workers and using racialised language. With limited variation as discussed in the following section, across all contexts, crowded housing, frequent moves, and the sector’s invisibility coupled by low unionisation reinforced precarity and made maintaining or achieving regular status harder.

Overworked, on-call, and paid (below) the minimum wage

Across study countries, all interviewees earned either below the minimum wage or just the bare minimum wage. When receiving additional pay, it was paid as cash-in-hand, including those working in roles of responsibility (for instance, as a chef). For example, in the UK, Patrick had gone from pot-washing to working as a chef in the same restaurant over few years. He explained:

I did most of it without any formal [raise in wage and in contract level]. I did most of that still as a kitchen porter on contract. (Patrick, Nigerian, regular, restaurant, UK).

Even when the contract was regarded as “good”, interviewees also worked more hours. As Sara in Austria explained:

In my case, they give you a work schedule and normally I never left at the time I was supposed to leave. And when I did minutes or extra hours, overtime. They don’t pay you these extra hours. (Sara, Chilean, semi-regular, restaurant, Austria).

The majority of our interviewees worked in restaurants either on a part-time or on-call basis. These conditions resulted in a great sense of precarity among interviewees, expressed particularly by those in Italy and the UK. In both countries, interviewees expressed their discomfort and worry of not knowing if their contracts would be renewed, and what would happen when their visas expired.

⁵ This was not necessarily a problem exclusive to the restaurant sector, but was only mentioned by our interviewees in this sector.

Doing the dirty and heavy work

None of our interviewees, in any of the study countries reported receiving training on health and safety in the kitchen. In Italy, the UK, Sweden, and Austria interviewees were mainly responsible for doing kitchen portering, washing dishes, and cleaning. Repeatedly, interviewees shared experiences of back pains from bending and standing for hours on end and complained about the unhygienic work environment and bad smells. Some interviewees, particularly those in Sweden, not only described the challenging working conditions they experienced but also compared their experiences as foreign workers vis-a-vis the local workers in the same position. As an interviewee from Latin America working in Sweden explained:

I realized that there are a lot of immigrants who do the work that Swedish persons don't do. Thanks to God, Swedes have the opportunity to work in what they want and have a better status than the immigrant person. And the immigrants are the ones who do the hard work [...] [Swedes] they are usually the ones who give orders. (Alex, Latin America, regular, restaurant, Sweden)

Another interviewee from Sweden, in an irregular situation, explained the severe disregard for his health from their employer:

I worked in a restaurant once. I got injured here. But I had to work all day with blood. I couldn't go home. I told my employer that I needed to go to the doctor. There was blood everywhere and I couldn't go home. He said, don't you see how many people coming now, you have to stay and work. I worked there until my shift was over and then I went straight to the emergency room. They vaccinated me and then treated me. Then I was at home for a few weeks. (Mario, Latin America, irregularised, restaurant, Sweden)

In Sweden, interviewees from Latin America across all migration statuses referred to experiences of racism, exploitation, and threats from employers. Those with a regular status reported seeking support following these experiences from trade unions and other forms of labour protection, but irregularised workers were unable to do so for fear of being fired and/or deported:

I worked almost every day, without breaks, even Saturday and Sunday. I didn't have time to stop. And well, that's the opportunity you have to work, work and that's it, right? And you have the thought that if you say no, they can fire you. And since you come to this country to practically work, you have no choice but to continue. (Dani, Latin America, irregularised, restaurant, Sweden)

The degrading nature of the work, compared to the skills and aspirations of workers was also frequently invoked:

I mean, to be honest, every one of us that's sitting in the room, we had a better lifestyle back home. Like, I mean, can you imagine yourself having

to wash the dishes in a restaurant back home in our country? But here like, I mean, from the start, it was like, I'm washing the dishes. But I mean, as I don't know how to say, but I think I could, I mean, I can't. I can't imagine myself doing it my own country. (Khan, Afghani, regular, restaurant, Austria)

Racism was reported to be a constant experience at work, with a mild exception from our interviewees in the UK. In Italy, even though the restaurant sector is historically a multicultural sector, migrants complained about harsh language and being shouted at by supervisors. Such experiences are also visible in narratives from Austria, where interviewees shared that knowing German allowed them to “respond”, and be more assertive:

(...) here a lot of people come, foreigners who don't speak any English, no German either, and they usually opt for jobs where they are treated badly and they only accept because they have no other choice. (Ignacio, Chilean, semi-regular, restaurant, Austria)

Living conditions of interviewees in the restaurant sector varied across study countries. In Italy, interviewees experienced difficulties to accessing housing due to racism, while in the UK housing was considered as fairly accessible when sought out through co-ethnic communities (again, possibly a bias of our sample). Interviewees in Austria had experienced multiple scams while trying to rent rooms via online platforms. Returning home from work proved also challenging for some interviewees, as their place of work and accommodation were very distant and in the early morning and after nightshifts there was little public transport available. Across countries, precarity related to housing, including the need to move multiple times and living in crowded apartments was primarily experienced in urban and touristic areas.

Hidden work and invisibilised workers

Interestingly, across our study countries, foreign workers in restaurants proved to be among the most difficult for our teams to engage with this research. This was largely because the majority worked in the kitchen, the “back of the house”, and often did early morning or late-night shifts. The reasons why those who had a regular status could not work “front of the house” were mainly linked to their limited ability to speak the relevant language, while people with irregularised status had to be hidden to avoid being recognised as irregular. In rare cases interviewees with a more “entrepreneurial” approach managed to move from the kitchen to the front of the restaurant, interacting directly with clients and thus having more chances to learn the local language and engage in meaningful exchanges.

It is striking to note the similarity in the legal status of interviewees, partially due to the difficulties to engage directly with irregularised people: in Italy, Austria, Poland and the UK, the majority of interviewees were regular foreign students or asylum seekers, often overqualified for the work they undertook. Those with student visas are generally allowed to work only 20 hours per week. The vast majority of these interviewees were working considerably more hours per week than their visa limits, to be able to support themselves and working informally, on the basis of verbal arrangements. As one of the interviewees in Austria said:

On the student stay permit, 20 hours per week are insufficient to work and earn money for meeting basic needs, as you know international students' families cannot afford their expenses in Austria. Furthermore, the typical rent in this area is around 600 Euros. So, 600 Euros plus your groceries and other expenses, travelling, food, and if you add everything, then you add 300-400 plus Euros, so around 1000 Euros is your expenses, if you deal it well. (Samad, Pakistani, regular, restaurant, Austria)

Students in all countries found it very difficult to reconcile work in restaurants and study but they felt they had no alternative to sustain themselves. Even highly-skilled students (for instance, interviewees in Italy included Masters students in Computer Engineering) shared that they could not find any other job more related to their skills and training. Few interviewees wished to remain in this sector, but neither could they see a viable alternative. Among all interviewees, contract precarity, the prevalence of on-call arrangements, the minimal number of hours officially recorded, and (in the UK) the reliance on employers for visa sponsorship posed significant challenges to maintaining or achieving regular status.

Elder Care

Throughout European countries, demand for elder care is growing due to demographic aging and cost-reduction policies. In Austria and Poland, elder care workers are on the list of shortage of occupations and were on the temporary shortage list in the UK until 2025⁶. A useful heuristic to capture cross-national variation is through care regimes: the institutional division of responsibility for long-term care between families, the state, and markets, and the degree to which care is familialised (kept within households) or managed through supported services and regulated provision. Importantly, cash-for-care and marketisation can either reinforce family responsibility or enable outsourcing, increasing household purchasing power while leaving coordination and employment relations to families and intermediaries (Simmons et al., 2024; Leitner, 2003). These care-regime configurations then intersect with migration regimes by shaping *where* labour demand is located and *how* it is made “legible” to the state. Where care is heavily organised at the household level through cash benefits/market solutions, demand often concentrates in private homes and can be met through “migrant-in-the-family” patterns, including grey-zone arrangements and brokerage models that shift risks to workers (Simmons et al., 2024). Where services are more publicly organised and regulated, migrant labour is more likely to be channelled into formal providers (“migrant-in-formal-care” patterns) via employer-based recruitment and clearer employment standards, even if shortages persist. In both cases, migration policy (e.g., shortage designations, permitted contract types, posting and self-employment rules, and agency oversight) does more than respond to care “needs.” It actively determines which care-regime pathways expand (agency-mediated live-in care, institutional staffing, or hybrid arrangements), thereby shaping levels of formalisation, precarity, and exposure to exploitation (Leiber et al., 2019; Simmons et al., 2024).

Elder care provision in Europe capitalizes on migration, primarily of women, facilitated by formal and informal transnational care brokerage (Aulenbacher et al. 2024; Kindler et al. 2022; Leiber et al. 2019; Matuszczyk et al. 2022). Care agencies have become increasingly

⁶ Care workers remain on the ‘immigration salary list’ in the UK.

prominent intermediaries, though their role and regulation vary considerably. Transnational agencies (some operating across multiple European countries) recruit workers in countries of origin and place them with families in destination countries. Domestic placement agencies also match workers with households locally. The UK's liberal care regime relies heavily on the private market and means-tested public support, and most migrant care workers are employed by private agencies. Because the private sector often offers low pay and poor working conditions, it attracts migrants who are more willing than native workers to accept these terms (van Hooren 2012; Marino and Keizer 2022). Some countries heavily regulate agencies (requiring licenses, setting standards for working conditions), while others have minimal oversight. Agencies can formalize employment relationships by handling contracts, taxes, and social security contributions. However, they can also introduce new forms of precarity through temporary contracts, or classifying workers as self-employed to avoid employer obligations. Poland and Italy have a less regulated sector and more in-home care than Austria and Sweden. In the UK local authorities commission care agencies to provide home care visits⁷. Italy's home-based care regime, has led to the widespread private employment of migrant care assistants, known as 'badanti', who often live with the elderly person. This trend is further supported by uncontrolled cash benefits (like the Indennità di Accompagnamento) that families use to pay for private services (van Hooren 2012). The 2011 ILO Domestic Workers Convention (C189) pushed European countries toward better protections, though implementation varies. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in these arrangements, particularly for live-in workers who faced isolation, increased workloads, and sometimes couldn't return home. This has renewed debates about formalization and worker protections. The "care crisis" driven by aging populations continues to fuel demand for migrant domestic workers, creating tension between immigration restrictions and care needs.

⁷ Pre 2024, local authorities were inspected by the CQC but not the care agencies commissioned by the local authorities, while since 2024 they are controlled by the Care Quality Commission in England.

Table 5. Interviewees in the elder care sector by legal and work status, gender and country/region of origin

Focus country	Status				Work status	Country/ region of origin	Gender		TOTAL
	Regular	Semi-regular	Previous irregular	Current irregular			Male	Female	
Austria	8	1	3	-	0 informal 9 formal	Gambia Iraq Nigeria Pakistan Romania Serbia	4	5	9
Italy	5	2	2	4	9 informal 3 formal	El Salvador Eritrea Honduras Nigeria Peru Turkey/Syria Ukraine	-	11	11
Poland	9	5	3	-	12 informal 2 formal	India Nepal Pakistan Philippines Sri Lanka	-	14	14
Sweden	4	-	-	1	1 informal 4 formal	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	5
UK	7	1	2	8	8 informal 8 formal	Cameroon Ghana Greece Namibia Nigeria Pakistan Philippines Romania Zimbabwe	3	13	16
TOTAL	33	9	10	13	30 informal 26 formal				55

Country differences

In Poland and in Italy, care placement agencies of migrant workers played no or very little role compared to Austria, the UK or Sweden. In Sweden, Italy and Poland first entry of irregularised migrants and migrants with semi-regular status to the elder care sector occurred based on social networks, by replacing another migrant at work. Italy and Poland show similar exploitation patterns in live-in arrangements: unpaid additional work, limited free time, overworking (48+ hours weekly), low wages, and isolation. Italian workers also face racism, sexual harassment, and very uncomfortable living conditions. Interviewees from Austria, who all have a regular status, report racism from clients. The UK stands out for systematic exploitation despite initial formal pathways of entry (HCW visas), including payment withholding, unexpected deductions, paying for fewer hours than worked, document retention (bonded labour), sexual harassment in case of living-in care workers, scams and threats/extortion by fake care agencies. At the same time interviewees from the UK, in contrast

to the other studied countries, report access to support from civil society, including in relation to their children's access to health care. The gradient runs from more formalized systems (Austria/Sweden) to formal but heavily exploitative conditions (UK), to informal family-based care (Italy/Poland). It is important to note that we have no evidence from migrants with irregularised status working in elder care in Austria and in Poland.

Care as a labour market entry point for women

The study countries offer different entry paths for accessing work in elderly care. In Austria, interviewees, who were EU citizens arrived via intermediaries, who placed them in senior care and took care of regularising their employment. Austria has also bilateral skilled workers agreements⁸ signed among other with the Philippines, addressing the skilled labour shortage, particularly in the healthcare sector. In the UK, interviewees could enter on the basis of a health and care worker visa⁹ (a route that the UK government closed in July 2025)¹⁰. Such opportunities were absent in the testimonies of third-country nationals among our interviewees working in Italy, Poland and Sweden. These research participants had always worked in an irregularised or semi-regular fashion, entering as tourists or asylum-seekers and engaging in work with neither a work permit nor contract. In the past, in the case of Italy, work in senior care offered a path to regularisation of status of stay through sporadic regularisation campaigns during crisis situations (e.g. the 2020 regularisation campaign). Recently, and after the end of PRIME fieldwork, the Italian quota system for care workers expanded to include 10.000 extra quota third country nationals who will be able to reach Italy with a work visa for care work. In Sweden the state used to provide financial benefits for the care of closely related persons¹¹, which also covered migrants with a regular stay, but this was however suspended in 2025. Meanwhile, in Austria 24/7 in-home care work was regularised in 2007¹².

Dependence on work for precarious documents

Our interviewees working in elder care had different types of statuses of stay: some short-term, for instance having to renew them on a recurrent basis annually (such as a work visa), others more long-term (for example, a 3 year-long residence permit). In most cases the regular status of stay was linked to employment and length of the work permit, with the person being dependent on the employer or intermediary, such as the employment agency. Work-related visas via a sponsor was prevalent in the interviews from UK and Italy, but absent from Poland. However, this path was also abused, with employment agencies who had sponsor licenses extorting from our research participants additional payment or work. For example, Ferhat, who joined her husband in the UK, together with their children, had to search quickly for a job, because her husband was made redundant and as a result his visa was curtailed. She recalled her interaction with a person representing the care agency through which she was trying to find a job. When she complained about her working conditions, after being hired, the care agency also threatened to revoke her sponsorship. Similar threats were directed at her, the moment she needed more days off due to illness:

⁸ See: <https://www.bmwet.gv.at/en/Topics/Business-Location/qualified-professionals.html>

⁹ See: <https://www.gov.uk/health-care-worker-visa>

¹⁰ The introduction of the HCW saw an important increase in the number of male care workers in the UK, however the sector remained feminised.

¹¹ See: <https://www.forsakringskassan.se/english/sick/employee/benefit-for-the-care-of-closely-related-persons>

¹² See: https://360.lexisnexis.at/d/rechtsnorm-ris/hbeg_hausbetreuungsgesetz/L-20005362-P0

She said to me, first of all you are giving us the £ 650 right now. (...) after 15 days the rest of the money (...) If you are not giving us the money then I will revoke the visa. (Farhat, Pakistani, elder care UK, irregularised)

In Italy our interviewees also faced challenges to regularise their stay. One interviewee, Angela, had a regular status of stay at the time of her interview for this study, but her residence permit was about to expire. She had also previously experienced irregularisation due to overstaying in the past, and explained the efforts of her employer to support her to regularise as follows:

See, a lady for whom I work wanted to make me a contract, right? And they told her “no, she has to have a permit to have the contract”. I say, this is a vicious circle, can’t you see? Because, first to have a residence permit I have to have a contract, and to have a contract I need to have a residence permit. (Angela, Peruvian, irregularised, elder care, Italy)

In the case of Ukrainian nationals with a temporary protection status (TPD), this status offers almost free access to the labour market. In Poland, the only obligation is that the employer informs the labour office of hiring a Ukrainian with TP and about conditions of work. However, we came across only a few cases of formal employment with contracts being signed, while those who had written agreements had contracts with minimum wage and hours declared, while the rest of the pay was given to the interviewees cash-in-hand. That is also prevalent in Italy and resulted in part from private senior care in both countries being part of the informal economy. In the UK and Italy, we also identified among research participants the need to use other people’s documents to be able to access work in elder care. For example, we found evidence that our interlocutors from the UK, were pressured to “lend” their residence documents or bank account numbers by those who wanted to access elder care, especially institutional care work through intermediaries.

Accessing jobs and exploitative working conditions

Many of the interviewees received information and work-related recommendations through social networks, often starting their first job by replacing another migrant. Comparing the data across countries, a clear difference is visible when it comes to the access to live-in and live-out in senior care. While live-in senior care was practically not accessible in Sweden, it was the main form of care available to our interviewees in Italy and in Poland, both countries having a family-based care system. Across countries, language was a barrier in accessing elder-care work opportunities, regardless of migration status. In Sweden in particular, this meant also that care work was generally only available within the language-community of participants.

The moment interviewees accessed work in institutionalised elder care with a regular status of stay they received some form of training. The only context of an irregularised worker engaged in institutionalised care work via care agencies was in the UK. To do this, Rose (from Namibia) paid an intermediary over £1500 for a fake national insurance number, fake proof of address, and fake stamp in passport, which meant she could open a bank account in her name, and then work through care agencies in different parts of the country. In this context, Rose did not receive any training. Interviewees with longer residence documents had more opportunities for a regular work schedule than those on short-term documents, such as visas.

Meanwhile, irregularised migrants were untrained, having to deal with physical and mental health issues of the elderly. As Marta, who entered Poland on a biometric passport as a tourist and worked without a permit nor contract: *'she took me on as a carer and as a servant...the conditions were unbearable'* (Marta, Ukrainian, semi-regular, elder care, Poland). Interviewees with both a semi-regular and regular status of stay in Poland highlighted the lack of information or disinformation about the actual working conditions given by the employer. Similarly, those who entered via international recruitment the UK and Italy, and who signed contracts, also worked in different conditions than expected, as Hameed recalled his wife's experience in the UK:

Then after a month, she complaining me with her proper pain from the left shoulder and from the right neck from the back here because of the pulling of helping people so that's why... so one day we realised that how many hours she did in the week, according to the job rota, so they give less than 40 or 47 hours or something, less than 50 hours, but actual time she did it more than 74 hours. (Hameed, Pakistani, irregularised, elder care, UK)

Those who had a regular status of stay were often live-in care workers. Despite their more stable legal situation they lacked a work schedule and we find evidence of consistently working more hours than being paid for. As one of our interviewees, Flory working as living-out care worker in Austria, mentioned:

For one day, you have a schedule multiplied by how many days you're there, and that's it, but it doesn't say I must work for 12 hours or not... I don't really see the good parts, you know? Because the insurances are the most minimal that you can have... I don't get sick leave, vacation leave. They don't exist. Those are unwritten, the hours you have to work, they are not written anywhere, how many hours you have to work or not, how long you can stay, so they... when they [the employer] hears 24/24, they get the impression that we have to be at their service 24/7. (Flory, Romanian, regular, elder care, Austria)

In the interviews with migrants with a regular stay (at the moment of the study) in the UK, who found work through a care agency, they experienced unexplained pay deductions and they had to juggle the care for multiple people in one day. Patience arrived on a Health and Care Worker Visa, having paid £3000 to the care agency who sponsored her first visa. She explained:

When the pay slip comes, I would look at the hours, they are saying I've done 100 hours, but probably, I've done 180 hours. So, I would say, I would challenge them. 'I've done 180 hours, why are you saying 100?' And she says, it's more or less that you are lying, you didn't do the work. (Patience, Zimbabwean, irregularised, elder care, UK)

Interviewees with an irregularised or semi-regularised status overall held the most difficult jobs in elder-care, such as a living-in situation or responsibility for night-shifts. The irregularities related to stay and work very much affected the working hours in senior care. For instance, in the UK and Sweden, people worked only 2-3 days per week "on call". Interviewees with an irregularised status of stay found it impossible to plan their everyday work-schedule, having

to be constantly available not only for the elderly, but also for other family members present in the household. Meanwhile, in Italy and Poland, those with an irregularised or semi-regular status had only oral work agreements, but paradoxically often reported more stable work schedules.

Regarding living conditions, those who had a contract had more personal space in live-in care situations, while those without any documents of stay or work contract lacked such space and often slept on the sofa or floor of the living room of the person they worked for. However, across migration statuses, our interviewees dealt with profound uncertainty when accommodation was dependent on work. As Maria, who had a very stable regular status of stay (with an EU resident permit) in Poland said:

I'm holding on. They often told me to leave that lady. I can't because I have a job. I'm employed and for me it's just fine. And I'm very broken mentally and physically too. (Maria, Ukrainian, elder care PL, regular, Poland).

Interviewees in Italy experienced live-in conditions that included broken heating, no hot water, and regular abuse from the cared-for person. In the majority of cases, the interviewees worked 7 days a week, with no time off. Across statuses of stay, multiple interviewees reported maltreatment in live-in care, including verbal abuse, lack of privacy, sexual harassment and not being entitled to eat. As Dominica, an interviewee from Austria, said:

There are certain families that offer you their help, their support, and even respect. So there are some that are ok. The vast majority, on the other hand, see you as a kind of servant. (Dominica, Romanian, regular, elder care, Austria)

Many of our interviewees reported not receiving any support, access to recourse for their experiences from either civil society organisations or state institutions. Their precarity was significantly aggravated by conditional access to documents, and the living-in character of home care work undertaken. A notable exception was evident in the interviews from the UK, with those with a refugee status, having received support from unions, but also those who arrived on HCW visas, having received third sector support, thanks to having children. For example, Grace, whose HCW visa was revoked and who has a teenage son, said: *"when I went with my son to the doctor, they are the people who linked me to the charity because of my son's condition. That one is a charity organization [...] that's helped us"*. (Grace, Zimbabwean, irregularised, elder care, UK)

Within **in-home senior care**, similar challenges are faced across countries and statuses regarding working conditions. However, the most vulnerable are those who are living-in home care workers. These interviewees endured many forms of exploitation, reminiscent of forms of bonded labour, in order not to lose their status of stay and place of living. Many concluded that it was impossible to envisage leaving their work in these circumstances. Interviews conducted in Italy, Austria and the UK all suggested that live-in care workers also lacked access to any form of support mechanisms to prevent mistreatment. Those who did not live with their employers, and were not dependent on the employer or employment agency for their status of stay were less likely to experience abuse. Paradoxically, interviewees with an irregularised status also tended to have stronger support networks in terms of access to information about alternative jobs and temporary housing options.

Waste Management and Recycling Sector

The waste management sector in our study countries that are EU member states operate within the European Union's extensive waste legislation, including the Waste Framework Directive, which sets the waste hierarchy: prevention, reuse, recycling, recovery, and disposal as a last resort. In addition, the Circular Economy Action Plan represents the EU's broader strategy to move beyond linear "take-make-dispose" models toward circular systems that keep materials in use longer. Waste management companies range from large multinational corporations (such as Veolia, Suez or Remondis) to smaller regional operators. Some countries have strong municipal waste companies. There are considerable regional variations, with Northern Europe (including Austria) characterized by high recycling rates (often 50-65%+ for municipal waste), well-developed separate collection systems and advanced sorting and processing facilities. Southern Europe (including Italy) has more variable performance, with some regions excelling (with growing separate collection systems in the north) and others lagging. Infrastructure investment in Central and Eastern Europe (including Poland) is primarily driven by EU membership (Gregson et al. 2016; Weghmann 2023; European Court of Auditors 2025).

The balance between public and private control over waste services varies in our study countries. In Austria major Waste to Energy (WtE) plants, such as the Spittelau facility in Vienna, are run by municipalities. Unlike Austria, the largest WtE plants in Sweden are controlled by private companies. In Italy the largest incinerators are typically run by private companies, though municipalities often hold minority stakes through public-private partnerships (PPPs). The UK has seen a growing trend toward insourcing with 15 documented cases (notably including in boroughs of London, and in Liverpool), though major private companies like Veolia continue to dominate the market. In Poland insourcing is rare, with only one case (Jaworzno) identified in the available literature (Weghmann 2023).

Our study countries vary greatly in how they prioritize the "waste hierarchy," which places prevention and recycling above incineration. For example, Austria and Italy are among the few in Europe to have achieved the EU target rate of 50% municipal waste recycling. Austria specifically manages a high volume of major mineral waste due to mining and construction. In contrast, Poland falls below the EU-27 average for recycling. Furthermore, Poland has become a destination for illegal waste dumping and illicit trade, particularly from Germany. The UK relies heavily on exports, and sent 1.9 million tonnes of waste to India in 2019 alone (Weghmann 2023).

The situation for migrant workers in the European waste management sector has not been extensively studied, although recent research in Italy has highlighted both the essential role of migrant workers in recycling and informal waste collection in Italy, and the gendered dimensions of this work (Bonatti et al. 2019). Throughout Europe, the sector involves low-wage, labor-intensive roles, often within the informal economy or the private recycling industry¹³. In one of the few studies of migrant labour in waste management to date, a report

¹³ Despite EU regulations on the shipment of waste (Regulation (EC) No 1013/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 June 2006 on shipments of waste <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A02006R1013-20210111>) the majority of it is sent abroad and in those countries is also placed on migrant workers. For example, in Turkey, which receives nearly half of Europe's waste exports, informal systems involve Syrian and Afghan migrants working as waste pickers in cities like Adana and Istanbul.

commissioned by the European Public Service Union (Weghmann 2023) highlighted that migrant workers in this sector are defined by precarious employment, significant health risks, and barriers to collective organization. In the formal waste sector, particularly in recycling and sorting plants, migrants make up a large portion of the workforce. These roles typically pay only the minimum wage and involve monotonous tasks performed in noisy, smelly, and confined environments. A significant portion of the circular economy in Europe (estimated at over 20% of its total employment) relies on informal labor. This informal work is frequently carried out by refugees and migrants who may lack formal identity papers, as well as other marginalized groups like the Roma and Sinti. From the available data, we know that informal workers generally earn less than the minimum wage, as they rely on the small amounts of money made from selling recovered materials. They are exposed to extreme health and safety risks because they often work without any protective clothing or equipment. Private waste companies often target informal workers because their activities (e.g extracting materials from bins) undermine the companies' ability to profit from the waste they formally own. Despite their critical role in achieving high collection rates (such as in deposit refund schemes), these workers remain largely invisible and unacknowledged in EU policymaking, which tends to focus on job quantity rather than job quality (Weghmann 2023).

Table 6. Interviewees in the waste management sector by legal and work status, gender and country/region of origin

Focus country	Status				Work status	Country/ region of origin	Gender		TOTAL
	Regular	Semi-regular	Previous irregular	Current irregular			Male	Female	
Austria	1	2	-	3	5 informal 1 formal	Afghanistan Pakistan Nigeria	6	-	6
Italy	2	1	-	1	2 informal 2 formal	Nigeria Senegal stateless	4	-	4
Poland	8	3	-	-	1 informal 10 formal	Ukraine Colombia	3	8	11
Sweden	2	-	-	1	1 informal 2 formal	n.a.	2	1	3
UK	10	-	1	2	2 informal 10 formal	Cameroon Ghana India Kenya Poland Nigeria Romania Sri Lanka	10	2	12
TOTAL	23	6	1	7	11 informal 25 formal		25	11	36

Country differences

According to our interviewees in Austria we find network-based recruitment through ethnic and religious ties, with one case of direct recruitment from a refugee centre by an informal cleaning company. Interviewees from Austria reported delayed cash-in-hand payments and workers felt ashamed about working without proper documents. In Italy, interviewees without status within our sample in this sector were engaged in ad hoc jobs with no regular hours. Migrant workers with a semi-regular status find employment through cooperatives managing refugee reception centres. Poland stands out as having no irregularised migrant workers interviewed in the waste management sector. Semi-regular and regular status migrants access work through intermediary companies recommended via networks. Across countries, interviewees report physically demanding conditions: waste sorting with 11-hour shifts while standing, working around unpleasant smells, no sick leave pay, and limited communication with workers of other nationalities leading to discrimination experiences. In Sweden and the UK interviewees with an irregularised status rely on ad hoc, temporary arrangements with irregular hours. Sweden-based interviewees faced multiple payment issues (delayed, low wages, sometimes not paid at all), restricted time to complete tasks, cash-in-hand payments, and gender-based harassment by employers. Interviewees from the UK received cash-in-hand, their wages were below minimum wage or even payment only in food coupons instead of money.

Accessing waste and recycling work with documents

Across our study countries, the waste management and recycling sector seems to be highly regulated according to our interviewees and for that reason, difficult to access for irregularised migrants, unless these are part-time, specific tasks or ad hoc jobs. Among our research participants, those who worked in this sector for large waste management companies had a regular status of stay, such as a work-related visa, a temporary residence permit (based on work or protection status) or were in the process of seeking asylum. Across all countries and statuses, social networks, in particular family members and friends, proved to be important sources of information concerning access of work in this sector and recommendations to employers. Through social networks, interviewees also learned about (un)trustworthy employment agencies. However, this central role of social networks, can also be seen as a form of negative social capital, with migrants' channelled in to work requiring minimal skills.

Fuzzy work arrangements, but better working conditions

In Poland, people who arrived on the basis of a visa free mobility, employment contracts were made for some by intermediary agencies on the basis of student cards, which allowed them to access the labour market and regularise their stay. The contract had multiple exceptions, giving our interviewees practically no rights, and interviewees explained that they could be fired from one day to another. However, in this seemingly regulated work environment, discrepancies occurred with Roma, who had been working her second year at the recycling facility:

This year, they didn't give me anything to sign. [...] They didn't give me anything. I mean, last year they made me sign something, but this year,

nothing. [...] I think some documents are necessary, but I don't have time to ask why they weren't signed. Well, this year they didn't give them to us. (Roma, Ukrainian, regular, waste management, Poland)

Differences emerged across countries in the working conditions of migrants with regular statuses, for instance those working in the UK reporting receiving health and safety trainings, and shorter shifts (8 hours-long) in contrast to 12 hour shifts in Poland. In both, shifts were paid per hour, with rates dependent on different work agencies. As Monique from Columbia, whose work involved sorting wood from incoming waste at a waste removal plant, complained:

I think the most uncomfortable thing is that it's 11 hours, you're totally on your feet, you can't sit down. So that's the hardest part of the job, being on your feet for 11 hours straight is a bit difficult, and even more so when you work every day. (Monique, Columbian, semi-regular, waste management, Poland)

However, among interviewees who had also experienced work in other sectors, and who overall regarded their work as temporary while planning to return to their country of origin, interviewees saw it as a plus that the work was “simple”, with less responsibilities than in the other sectors. As one Ukrainian national in Poland poignantly stated “*you don't have to think*”. In Poland, intermediary agencies also provided workers with accommodation in this sector, in the form of hostels close to the waste removal plant. Interviewees reported being treated as equals to Polish nationals by their supervisors, even if they de facto only worked with other foreign workers while Poles were typically employed in more senior positions. Latin American interviewees were the only group who collectively complained of discrimination from other co-workers. This was not the case in the UK, where interviewees from African countries did experience racist discrimination from their supervisors.

Irregularised status and deeper precarity

Several interviewees who had semi-regular or irregularised statuses of stay undertook work that we defined as falling within this sector, including the segregation of used clothes; collection of waste from small restaurants; ad-hoc removal of waste and cleaning of public areas; and door-to-door heavy-waste collection. Often this kind of work was not carried out in isolation, but rather was one of multiple ad hoc jobs that irregularised migrants undertook to get by. As one interlocutor in Sweden noted:

I'm kind of irregular, but not by will, but because of the rules and regulations that have been imposed. Right now, let's say, the part of immigration has been very strict, so it has been almost impossible to meet the requirements that they demand for the labour permit, for a work permit. I asked for a work contract, but they denied it because it didn't meet the requirements. So, I had to find a way to work in a way, let's say, I don't know how to say it, 'irregular'. (Joy, Latin America, irregularised, waste management, Sweden)

In the case of Austria, interviewees worked informally cleaning up after festivals and public events. These interviewees were either students, or asylum seekers waiting for their documents to be processed who preferred to find work to do than rely on welfare payments while waiting for the results of their asylum claims. Usually this work was “hidden” and

undertaken during the night. Again, as in the other sectors, irregularised status of stay led to a lack of a regular work schedule, having to be available “on call” as opportunities arose. All of the interviewees with an irregularised status of stay experienced not being paid for their work or being paid less than agreed for their work by the informal employers or intermediaries. For instance, Cat (who had repeatedly sought asylum and intended to do so again) worked at a warehouse sorting second-hand donated clothes, some of which were sent abroad where they’re sold for profit and others were shredded for rags. She explained:

I've tried breaking through to other places. It's not possible...because of the fear from the government, what the government have said, that even some landlords don't want to take asylum seeker, so [...]. Some working place, if they find out that the person is working without document, they fine the office, so everybody's being careful. (Cat, Nigerian, semi-regular, waste management, UK)

Reliance on ad-hoc work within the waste management sector was often explained in relation to broader public and political discourse surrounding migration, through which interviewees both expressed a pervasive fear of being exposed; and felt unable to access other forms of work because of their lack of necessary documents. Jalal, who worked in Austria cleaning after festivals, experienced delays in payments:

The owner of this cleaning company delayed my one-month job payment and insisted that he would pay me shortly, but then he delayed it again. In that situation, I informed his close friend about the matter, and he paid me payment little late. As a result, if you have such a problem, you cannot go to the police to complain about your money because it is not possible in "black" job. However, you will always strive to share the problem with your friends in order to find someone for approach who is close to the owner (the owner of the firm), and perhaps you will collect your reimbursement.”(Jalal, Afghani, irregularised, waste management, Austria)

Social networks, especially linked to the migrant community, with ethnic and religious specificities where of crucial importance in the case of our interlocutors with an irregularised status in terms of accessing jobs. Despite the generally regulated nature of work in this sector across the study countries, waste management and recycling contain pockets of employment accessible to migrants with irregular status. While the availability of such work varies considerably by country, interviewees suggest it is associated with the low social prestige of these jobs and the reluctance of others to perform them.

Navigating irregularity: Personal lives and workers’ visions for change

The concept of navigation is helpful in articulating how people find ways to survive and ‘move’ in highly uncertain circumstances and under the influences of multiple actors (Vigh 2009). We find navigation useful in understanding how irregularised migrants formulated priorities within their extremely challenging work environments. Interlocutors with irregularised status across sectors employed similar strategies to navigate everyday survival. Most striking among interviewees across sectors was the sense that it was almost impossible for individuals to

make future plans, or think ahead. The terrain of work and daily life was constantly shifting, and workers were constantly firefighting to navigate from one day to the next. There was no sense of linear trajectory towards regularising status, or pathways to see their circumstances significantly improving. As one in-home care worker in Sweden said: “*It’s very little money and a lot of work. You have to do that, you don’t have a choice. You don’t work, you try to survive.*” Indeed, many interlocutors worked in multiple jobs in different sectors, both to combine their earnings and to diversify risks related to exploitation. Almost no irregularised interviewees spoke of engagement with trade unions, limiting pathways to negotiate workplace conditions.

Racialisation was a defining aspect of daily life, particularly among interviewees in Sweden and in Italy, affecting access to work as well as the feasibility of renting accommodation. Numerous interviewees with regular status in Italy reported experiences of calling landlords to enquire about rented accommodation, only to be told there was nothing available as soon as they gave their name. In Sweden, one interviewee shared:

It is hard to find a job when you have a foreign background. Yes, I think that there is discrimination against certain groups of people. For example, if you have a name that doesn’t sound like a Swedish name. Even if you are educated and smart, you won’t get this job. Someone else will get the job instead of you. It’s very hard to find a job when you have a foreign background (Arman, Middle East, regular, restaurants and care, Sweden)

In the UK and Sweden, navigating the day to day was exacerbated by a strong fear of deportation among many interviewees, which limited their extent to engage in exiting their exploitative work environments, because they lived with a daily fear of detention. This was not as heightened among interviewees in Poland, Italy or Austria. Access to and mobilisation of resources in social networks played a crucial role for irregularised migrants and those with a semi-regular status of stay. Among the most important resources flowing from those who had spent longer in the country of work to newcomers was information about entry pathways allowing them to access work, and the necessary (often facade) documents. This information also proved crucial the moment migrants decided they needed quickly to change jobs, either due to exploitation (such as routinely being denied pay or experiencing unbearable working or living conditions); or due to fear of disclosure (for example, an intermediary agency or employer asking them to provide additional documents). A vital resource during periods between different forms of work was the possibility to borrow money, both from family members (in countries of origin), or from friends in the country of work. Reliance on borrowed funds was also routinely shared in relation to the need to pay high fees when submitting applications for documents of stay.

The majority of our interviewees, regardless of status of stay, had family members in their countries of origin. This meant longing for absent family members, provision of transnational care combined with sending financial remittances to support children, partners and elderly parents elsewhere. In the case of our interviewees originating from Ukraine, their migration projects were built around supporting their children to have a better future. In light of the ongoing war, many saw these aspirations as having failed. A comparable dynamic was observed across nationalities, among individuals with an irregularised status of stay who were unable (legally) to bring over their partners and/or their children:

My life can improve if I bring my family here, which will be possible once I have acquired official asylum documents. If I have a proper asylum status, I will be allowed to work regularly and have a full-time working contract. (Jalal, Afghan, regular, waste management, Austria)

Having documents of stay meant for our research participants being able to travel home to see their families and friends. Those having a semi-regular status and originating from a country in close geographical proximity, who engage temporary, circular migration – such as Ukrainian migrants – did spend part of the time regularly with their families in the country of origin. Engagement in seasonal work or informal “rotation system” in senior care allowed that. Having access to documents, meant also the possibility for family members to visit and to support in care obligations.

Among interviewees in the UK who were brought as dependents of visa-holders, conversely ended up with wider access to opportunities across the labour market and better working conditions, because they were not dependent on a sponsor for their visa. In UK however, the question of ‘dependents’ emerged through experiences of gender-based exploitation among female migrants, who are forced by scam-agencies into fake marriage contracts. We found diversity across countries regarding regularised status of stay provided by the state to children in the same family, with Sweden giving the right to reside only to the youngest children, while rejecting applications of adolescents. These experiences also show the extent to which gender inequalities can be linked to regularisation of status. For instance, in Italy women with children tend to have more access to a regular status of stay than men; Angela, an interviewee from Peru who became undocumented after applying for regularisation as a care worker in 2020, mentioned the need to ask for a residence permit through article 31¹⁴ which would also include her children: *“I enrolled my son in school and with article 31, which the lawyer could help me with, I could get the residence permit for them too.”* (Angela, Peruvian, irregularised, elder care, Italy)

Participants who had family members in the country of current residence generally (at least initially) held a regularised residence status. Those who had families faced the challenge of combining work with care, with issues related to regularisation for multiple individuals. Very few irregularised migrants had immediate family members with them in the country of current residence, and none had children under the age of 18. In the case of irregularised migrants having to contact health services due to childbirth or serious illness of children meant huge costs, which the person is unable to cover, impacting his/her their future possibilities of applying for residence and work, as reported by our interviewees from the UK.

The main concern among interviewees with a regular or semi-regular status who had a family was finding somewhere to live. In some countries, landlords demanded proof of (often multiple) work contracts to rent, proving a high threshold of regular income. Among interviewees in Sweden in particular, the high cost of rent meant that families with children were confined to small and uncomfortable spaces. Having children also precluded interviewees from using housing provided by either intermediary agencies or employers.

¹⁴ The residence permit under art. 31 of the *Testo Unico Immigrazione* is granted to the family members of a foreign minor in order to ensure the child’s physical and psychological well-being.

Differences in how working conditions affected personal and family lives were particularly evident between live-in and live-out workers, as well as among those with different residence statuses. Live-in workers had virtually no opportunity to maintain a family life in the country of migration and very limited possibilities for social interaction or personal leisure. In contrast, live-out workers (who often combined for instance elder-care employment with other jobs such as cleaning) could exercise greater control over their time. Those employed in institutions or care homes also resided separately from their workplaces. Comparable challenges emerged regarding access to adequate housing for the family members of migrants employed in the food-processing sector. Once workers were settled with their families, they become less able to meet intermediaries' demands for high levels of work flexibility and geographical mobility across the country.

Besides family, the majority of our interviewees across status and sector had very limited personal lives due to the work arrangements, including long and late hours of work, lack of privacy in employer-provided accommodation, and overall exhaustion. Xochitl, working in care work in Italy and stuck in lengthy regularisation procedures for asylum, shared:

It is not easy here, I can't even say that I have friends here, because due to my work, I have no friends. (...) I'm always working, so when I'm not working, I take rest. Because working every day and getting home late... Sometimes I just arrive, eat something, prepare the next day's lunch, go to bed at midnight, get up at 6 or before 6.... (Xochitl, Honduran, irregular, elder care, Italy)

Status of stay across all sectors primarily determined the possibility of family life. Although the limited access to work of irregularised migrant workers and the exploitative working conditions do limit personal life due time constraints and lower the possibilities to support one's family financially due to low wages, the status itself (or rather lack of a regularised status) among our interviewees seemed to drastically decrease the possibilities of even contemplating family or personal lives.

Through our interviews, we also sought to understand the perspectives of (ir)regularised workers across sectors regarding the most important changes that were needed to improve their current circumstances of work; the actors and services required to implement such changes; and the obstacles they faced in efforts already made towards this ends. There have been extensive advocacy efforts towards the regularisation of irregularised migrants (for recent discussion, see Ahrens et al. 2025) and our assumption before posing these questions to interviewees was that indeed, having stronger documents of stay and work would be the most critical step to improving their circumstances, regardless of their sector of work. Indeed, we found very little variation in the perspectives of migrants across different sectors of work:., very few of the changes they sought were directly in relation to their current work, but rather in relation to their wider circumstances of stay, work, and daily life in Europe. It is also important to emphasise that across sectors and across countries, there was a strong desire among irregularised migrants to stay hidden owing to a fear of destitution, or in the contexts of Sweden and the UK, of deportation. In many ways, this created an enormous obstacle for individuals to even think about what could help to improve their circumstances (for instance, trying to change their sector work, or location of work). As was repeatedly stated, the challenges of navigating immediate needs (earning money; paying rent; eating; sending money home and managing the day to day) required all of their time and energy and left

limited capacity for thinking about the longer-term future and possibilities of change. However, the following topics were raised in different ways among interviewees across countries and across sectors. Few of these visions for change were explicitly linked to a specific sector, and indeed were remarkably ubiquitous across national contexts, but we highlight the variation that was expressed by interviewees through the following discussion.

Stronger documents of stay could improve working conditions when coupled with sectoral change

The kinds of work undertaken by our interviewees across statuses were widely described by interviewees as undignified forms of hard, and sometimes dangerous work. Working conditions were reported as extremely difficult regardless of migration status, but vulnerabilities are clearly exacerbated by a weak or precarious status (i.e., irregularity or semi-regularity). Indeed, among our interviewees, those with weaker or temporary status were systematically more exposed to abuse, wage theft, and exploitation. Several interlocutors across statuses and sectors advocated for alternative ways to access documents and to reduce precarity in life and at work, and crucially to reduce levels of anxiety in their day-to-day lives. However, even those possessing documents of stay and work often described their desire to move towards stronger documents, and more permanent permits of stay, or longer-term permits of work. These recommendations included regularisation programmes, the easing of bureaucracy for permit renewal processes, and the possibility of conversion from one type of residence permit to another (e.g., student visa to work permit). As an interviewee in the restaurant sector in Poland with a regular but precarious residence permit said:

To be honest, what is really important is that you don't have to worry about, about your documents. To make [access to documents] quick, that's it. Because once you start working, you should have a work permit - all the documents should be there. (Nathan, Filipino, semi-regular, restaurants, Poland)

The need for a change in practices by institutional bodies was also mentioned by our interviewees. State offices and bodies responsible for immigration were perceived as primarily focusing on surveillance and exclusion of migrant workers, or on complicating migrants' lives with extremely complex and time-wasting bureaucracy (particularly in the case of Italy) rather than forms of supportive service provision. Interviewees stressed the need for a shift from control to support in order to facilitate access to work and to make their daily lives better, both at work and outside, and with their families.

Moreover, interviewees lamented differences in treatment across nationalities, citing examples such as Syrians in Sweden (as workers from Latin American argued) or Ukrainians in Poland, who were comparatively granted access more swiftly to residence, labour market, and social rights. These cases were mentioned not to complain about the different treatment of other nationalities, but to argue that such treatment should be extended to all those who contribute to society, regardless of origin.

Interviewees, particularly in Italy, Poland and Austria, critiqued the increasingly restrictive legal frameworks that create unnecessary hurdles in terms of access to (and retention of) work, housing, welfare services, especially for those already embedded in the labour market.

Even interviewees who worked and wanted to pay taxes were denied recognition and stability. For instance, one woman in Italy who, at the time of the interview in 2024 was stuck in a bureaucratic limbo after applying for regularisation in 2020 explained:

So what can I do? I can work, but I can't rent without residence [permit]. And I don't know if I can declare other things. For example, when you do the 730 [tax return] I don't know if I can do it, because then if I make a [tax] statement then they tell me "You shouldn't be able to do it." So, I stand there: shall I do it, or I don't do it. And if I do it, why do I do it or why should I not do it? (Tochi, El Salvadoran, semi-regular, elder care, Italy)

One particularly salient demand concerned the right to work during asylum procedures, which was framed both as a matter of dignity and as a logical extension of economic participation. This was particularly the case in Austria. Although legally asylum seekers do have the right to work, they may only do so if both they and their potential employers pass through extremely demanding administrative procedures. This recommendation was also present in other countries where, although asylum seekers are formally allowed to work a relatively short amount of time after filing the asylum application (2 to 6 months), but the possibility to work is hampered by the scarcity of dignified housing solutions beyond reception centres.

Finally, the financial barriers embedded in regularisation procedures were widely criticised by our interlocutors. In all national contexts other than Poland, applicants must demonstrate income levels or housing conditions that are often unattainable precisely because of their irregular or precarious status. This creates a paradoxical loop in which regularisation is contingent on the very forms of stability that such documentation is meant to provide.

While most interviewees called for the need to have stronger, less precarious documents and (where relevant) processes of regularisation, it also seems clear from our analysis of working conditions that stronger documents need to be combined with positive change within sectors. Various forms of work within the sectors we have studied have long functioned as drivers of irregularity and irregularisation, such as dishwashing in restaurant kitchens, live-in roles in elder care, seasonal fruit and vegetable picking and farming in agriculture, as well as the dirtiest and most strenuous tasks in food processing and waste sorting in recycling plants.

Greater acknowledgement of the central role of (illicit) intermediaries in migration governance

Many of our interviewees experienced misinformation from different types of intermediaries, ranging from official placement and employment agencies; to small cooperatives and businesses that are sub-contracted to lend workers to bigger companies; to informal intermediaries. Frequently, this was seen as a major reason for experiences of exploitation at work and irregularisation of their status of stay and work. Interviewees widely called for a regulation of this intermediation. When it comes to formal intermediaries, the responsibilities for the provision of regulations and implementing existing regulations lies here both on the side of the receiving and sending states. However, when it comes to implementation of regulations, employers who co-operate with these intermediaries should also be held accountable. Our findings point to the ways through which both the state and employers currently profit from the existence of scam agents, or agencies. Enabling of these agencies to

continue to exploit migrant workers seems to contribute somewhat to what Achilli (2024) has framed as ‘the legal production of illegality’, whereby exploitative intermediaries do not only disrupt migration governance, but rather actively shape it.

Regarding countering dis/misinformation spread via social networks and informal intermediaries, some interviewees recommended the state, in co-operation with civil society, including migrant organisations and trade unions could organise campaigns to prevent such situations, raising awareness about the existence of scams. In particular, older interviewees pointed also to the fact that the increasing digitalization of information (via information lines serviced by AI and internet platforms) makes access to reliable information even more challenging.

Considering this, research participants also explained the need for easier access to administration offices. Many reported that it was impossible to access administration offices because opening hours corresponded with their hours of work, and that they were forced to choose between trying to access reliable information and retaining their work. Even when they were able to access such offices, many were unable to communicate with administrative staff due to language barriers. The provision of translation in the languages of the primary migrant groups in the country, together with office hours, for instance over the weekend, would create opportunities for in-person consultations regarding regularisation of work and stay.

Reparations for dangerous and undignified work

Across interviews, participants of all statuses and in all sectors widely demanded reparative measures to address experiences of undignified and exploitative labour. Central to these claims is the need to strengthen mechanisms for holding employers and intermediaries (including informal intermediaries, and in the case of Italy, immigration lawyers) accountable. At present, workers have limited leeway to demand fair treatment, unless they denounce their employers or the intermediaries incurring a potential ban from work imposed by the very same employers/intermediaries. In addition, engagement with trade unions was generally minimal among our participants with regular status and non-existent among those who were irregularised (with the exception of Sweden). This suggests the need for accountability structures or control mechanisms that do not rely solely on worker-led mobilisation but instead intervene from other institutional or non-institutional actors.

Several interviewees called for the need to reach similar levels of remuneration with national workers, particularly in cases of semi-regular workers who contribute equally yet remain structurally underpaid. Beyond wage equality, interviewees emphasised the need for earnings that are sufficient not only to cover basic living expenses in the country of migration but also to sustain transnational financial responsibilities, such as remittances and/or travel debts. Earning money was also essential for maintaining social respect, in a context where social connections maintain a vital role in survival. As Jamal, a (failed) asylum seeker in Austria working in waste management, explained:

If I work and send money to my family, they are happy. [This is respected by] my friends pay me visits and occasionally take me out for dinner or on a short tour around the city. However, when I don't have a job or money, my family often gives me پينغور [taunt, which is considered an insult in Pashtun community]

for not working and earning money. As a result, when my friends learn that I am unemployed and do not have money, they ignore me to invite for a trip to the city or any other gathering, and they occasionally do not respond to WhatsApp messages. According to this situation, every asylum seeker must work hard in order to gain a status and create respect. (Jamal, Afghani, irregularised, waste management, Austria)

Rising living costs, especially in sectors reliant on seasonal labour, such as agriculture, were described as increasingly incompatible with stagnant wages. Leon, in Poland, explained:

You only got 100 hours there per month. Are you okay with that? That's just around 19,000 pesos. [...] And food isn't included. It's not worth it. Like... You can't even send money. You'll spend all of it." (Leon, Filipino, semi-regular, restaurants, Poland)

This was reported not only by third-country nationals but also by EU citizens employed in seasonal roles in countries such as Austria, while many of those previously undertaking seasonal agricultural work in Italy have either moved up the occupational ladder or exited the sector altogether, reflecting its growing unsustainability.

Another key theme mentioned by interviewees was the dependency on employers for the renewal or maintenance of residence permits. This dependency severely limits the ability of migrants to challenge abusive conditions or report irregularities within their employment arrangements. Workers frequently expressed fear that denouncing exploitation would lead not to remediation but to the loss of their legal status. Some employers, in turn, weaponise documentation as a means of control and exploitation. One interviewee in Italy, Tochi, described this situation:

[I cannot move beyond Italy] Because I have no residence. And I can't have residency without a document [residence permit] because I am illegal. Without a document I am illegal. [...] And the regularisation is blocked because they [the employers] don't want to... They don't want to declare what they are doing. (Tochi, El Salvadoran, semi-regular, elder care, Italy)

Such testimonies illustrate the link between legal precarity and labour subordination. Addressing this dynamic requires a shift in institutional focus. Rather than complicating migrants' lives and frightening them with the prospect of being expelled, disentangling this link between regularisation, access to work (and access to housing) and employers/work intermediaries is essential, particularly in countries whose sectoral economies depend heavily on these workers. In this framework, reparations should not be merely backward-looking compensation but forward-looking reconfigurations of responsibility and protection within labour regimes.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand variation in the factors shaping irregularised migrants' access to employment opportunities, working conditions, and the consequences of these experiences for their personal and family lives across diverse national contexts and sectors of employment. As discussed in the introduction, while existing scholarship has widely documented the deeply exploitative and structurally abusive conditions faced by irregularised migrants in European labour markets, this study introduced greater nuance by identifying where, how, and why patterns of work and vulnerability diverged. To this end, it compared the experiences of migrants with a legal right to reside and work; those working in violation of a regular status to reside; and with those without a status at all. In addition, the study foregrounded migrants' own perspectives on the changes they considered necessary to improve their working and living conditions. Contrary to recent accounts emphasising cross-national variation in the legal rights of irregularised migrant workers across Europe (Fox-Ruhs and Palme 2025), the findings revealed a striking degree of convergence across national contexts in both access to employment and the lived realities of working conditions, particularly among irregularised migrants.

Although this study has not explicitly examined national political dynamics, nor directly solicited migrants' perspectives on domestic politics, it is difficult to ignore the broader political context in which these findings are situated. Across all of the countries examined, right-wing, anti-migrant parties have entered or exerted significant influence over government, often on platforms centred on reducing or eliminating irregular migration. Within this context, enforcement priorities and regulatory choices appear to have enabled greater space for intermediaries who exploit or defraud migrant workers to operate with limited oversight. The resulting precarity may function as an indirect governance mechanism, discouraging complaint, encouraging exit, or deterring future migration. This broader political shift contributes to understanding why, despite divergent institutional arrangements and regulatory frameworks, migrant workers across these national contexts report remarkably similar experiences of insecurity, exploitation, and constrained agency. However, there are a number of country specific dynamics that have been explored in this report.

With respect to access to employment, the study found a pervasive reliance on intermediaries across all sectors and national contexts examined, with the employer as a predominantly invisible figure to migrant workers. The type of intermediary varied by institutional context and sector. For instance, in Poland intermediaries paid a critical role in accessing work in food processing, but practically none in elder care; while by contrast, in the UK and Austria, care agencies were crucial actors in accessing these sectors. Among interviewees, direct contact with employers was largely absent, with employment relationships instead mediated through subcontractors, agencies, or informal brokers. Within our sample we found that written contracts were generally required across countries and sectors, with notable exceptions limited to in-home elder care arranged directly with households, and, in some cases, restaurant pot-washing. These contracts created a façade of formality and regulatory compliance, despite workers' limited connection to the employer. Contracts were typically issued by intermediaries rather than principal employers, and workers rarely had direct employment relationships. Although contracts formally required documentation, in Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom identity and work documents were frequently circulated among individuals: a practice not observed in Sweden or Austria. This arrangement generated

additional vulnerabilities. Lacking personal documentation, workers were unable to open bank accounts and were therefore compelled to accept cash-in-hand payments, facilitating contract violations while simultaneously heightening precarity and physical insecurity, particularly given workers' frequent residence in overcrowded or unsafe environments. By contrast, Sweden's largely cashless economy effectively precluded cash payments, rendering the employment of fully irregularised workers considerably more difficult.

Despite the widespread presence of written contracts, these were rarely respected in practice. Across all study countries, interviewees reported consistently appalling working conditions in the sectors examined, affecting migrants both with and without legal status. Sectoral variation was nonetheless evident. Food processing and agriculture emerged as the most uniformly harsh environments for irregularised migrant women and men across all national contexts. Domestic elder care (particularly employment arranged directly with private households) was associated with the highest incidence of physical and sexual violence, harassment, and labour exploitation. In this sector, greater differentiation was observed in migrants' capacity to navigate processes of semi-regularity and irregularisation. For instance, migrants with lower costs of return to their countries of origin and stronger access to transnational and local networks, such as Ukrainian women employed in Poland under biometric passport arrangements, retained significant bargaining power. This was often far stronger than the bargaining power of, for example, women from African and South Asian countries who entered the UK via care-visa schemes and subsequently fled abusive employers. Working conditions in the gastronomy sector displayed greater cross-national variation; however, a common pattern across all focus countries was the prevalence of cash-in-hand employment among migrants who irregularised their status by exceeding the working-hour limits of student visas. Finally, experiences in waste management and recycling closely resembled those in food processing and agriculture: employment was ad hoc, lacked fixed schedules, and was largely invisible, conducted at night or in isolated settings with minimal interaction with members of the public in our study countries. Regardless of legal status, intermediaries (often illicit) played a central role in shaping migrants' access to employment, rendering workers broadly vulnerable to scams ranging from misinformation about wages and working conditions to the provision of fraudulent contracts. Such practices were frequently accompanied by severely exploitative and degrading living conditions, particularly in the sectors of care, agriculture, and food processing, often involving a serious disregard for workers' health. Dependence on intermediaries not only for employment but often for visas or sponsorship further constrained workers' ability to exit abusive labour arrangements. Although this dependence operated differently across institutional settings, its consequences were strikingly similar.

From the perspectives of those interviewed, aspirations for change centred on moving away from labour systems structured around exploitation and degrading forms of work. With the exception of asylum seekers, refugees and temporary protection holders many respondents did not migrate from contexts of extreme deprivation but rather to improve their own and their families' lives while contributing to destination economies facing labour shortages and population ageing. Instead, they were routinely channelled into precarious and irregularised employment from the outset, constrained by institutional arrangements that exploited rather than enabled their skills. This resulted in a costly labour-market mismatch, with overqualified migrants concentrated in low-skilled positions, particularly in restaurants (e.g., postgraduate students in marketing or computer engineering employed as pot-washers) and domestic care (e.g. nurses whose qualifications were not recognised and who consequently worked as

underpaid live-in carers). This is despite acute shortages of qualified high skilled workers throughout Europe.

Across countries and sectors, these dynamics suggest not simply regulatory gaps but a mode of labour supply in which irregularisation and constrained mobility render migrants continuously replaceable, treated as a disposable workforce who are readily substituted if injured, exhausted, or found (or made) non-compliant. In Italy and Poland, where informal employment has historically been subject to repeated regularisation efforts, intermediaries and employers appeared to have adapted to these regimes in ways that transformed formalisation processes into new sites of exploitation. Conversely, even ostensibly formal labour-migration pathways (such as those governing care work in Austria and care and agricultural work in the UK, but also seasonal work in Italy) were marked by intermediary-led scams, coercive working conditions, and pressures on workers to remain in exploitative employment in order to avoid deportation. Among irregularised migrants in particular, these dynamics were compounded by acute fears of destitution and, in the contexts of Sweden and the United Kingdom, deportation, alongside strong financial pressures to repay migration-related debts and contribute to household incomes. While legal status did mediate access to some protections (notably through trade unions, NGOs or civil society organizations) working conditions across the sectors studied remained highly racialised and constituted regimes of extreme exploitation, coercion, degradation and harm across all national contexts. In this sense, across national contexts, systems in place do not merely fail to prevent exploitation. They repeatedly make exploitation governable by ensuring a workforce that is at once essential and politically marginal: visible as a problem, yet treated as economically necessary.

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