Comparing the agency of irregular migrant workers in Germany, Italy, Morocco, Poland and Spain from an intersectional perspective

DignityFIRM Comparative Working Paper

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1. Introduction

Access to labour or other rights, such as ensured through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides a framework for general human rights, is not a privilege and it is not subject to the discretion of others. The primary responsibility for upholding the law and protecting workers' rights and preventing exploitation rests on employers and the state. This protection extends to ensuring rights are upheld e.g. through implementing safe complaint procedures, promoting public safety, and providing support services for those who are marginalized or disadvantaged. These rights apply to all individuals within a state's territory, including irregularized migrants.

Migrant workers are often dependent on low-waged labour with high exposure to occupational health and safety risks, irregular working hours and insecure positions. This applies both to migrants residing or working irregularly, and to those with precarious permits, often linked to temporary and seasonal contracts and to significant barriers to access their rights, depending on the quality and length of their permits (Chawla & Keith, 2025). Conversely, the willingness of undocumented workers to shoulder these kinds of jobs, their interchangeability and resulting lack of options to refuse these jobs or demand better work conditions also sustain these positions in the labour market. Elements like dependency on their employers to keep their permits or lack of firewalls and safeguarding in complaint mechanisms increase the challenges for the workers to claim their rights or demand better work conditions. In this context, the question is how much and what kind of agency migrant workers (can) have.

Agency conventionally means 'the capacity to act', meaning to have power, privilege and emancipatory potential to change structures, in this case labour regimes, rules and circumstances. History shows that substantive advancements in human rights resulted from struggles, protests, and movements where people actively fought to have their human rights embedded in laws and regulations. Several studies have documented the way migrant workers are capable of building powerful forms of collective agency to negotiate wages and working conditions with employers e.g. through unionisation, strikes, and transnational organizing across multiple sectors (Alberti, 2014; Penninx & Roosblad, 2000). Collective agency can also encompass forging community support networks and sharing information

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related to rights, jobs and resources (Darhour & Marroune, 2024), and its aim can be to claim or improve on individual and collective rights.

Mahmood (2001) and Madhok et al. (2013) suggest, however, that agency is not always measurable or subversive: it consists of multiple actions and strategies that people use during challenging situations. Indeed, various feminist researchers flagged that not everyone has equal capacities to act due to those same structures and power relations, and argue for a wider understanding of agency, to include also concepts like endurance, resilience or survival (Mahmood, 2001; Mohanty, 1988). In this way, 'agency' also includes the agency of people that are not in a powerful position to improve their personal circumstances, let alone that of the people of their community (Renkens et al., 2022). In this paper, we will examine agency on two levels: individual agency and collective agency. Individual agency encompasses a continuum in the kinds of agency that (irregularized) migrant workers have to endure, cope, keep up self-esteem or individual forms of negotiation or contestation to influence their own circumstances. With collective agency, we mean the agency migrants have to change the structures they are part of. Although occasionally this can be done by individuals, this usually is the result of taking collective action. The spectrum of collective agency goes from seeking support from other migrants, third-party organizations like informal migrant community groups, to trade unions, local authorities and NGOs.

The capacity to change their (labour) circumstances differs between (irregularized) migrant workers. An intersectionality perspective is a useful tool to examine the agency of irregularized migrant workers for several reasons: it helps do justice to migrant workers as a heterogeneous social category. It helps capture their experience as often shaped by interlocking instances of marginalization, based on a broad variety of identity markers (e.g., migration status, racialization, gender, literacy) and manifesting in different areas of life (e.g., work, housing, interpersonal relations). It is explicitly oriented toward the structural level of power relations that shape and maintain these instances of marginalization. And, importantly, an intersectionality lens also looks at the "flipside" of the same power relations (Nixon, 2019), which can be (unfair/unearned) privilege but also agency and self-empowerment.

The defining identity of the migrants we will study, and main basis for their lack of agency in comparison with regular employees and employers, is of course their irregular position. It is worth noting that migration status or irregularity as the lack of either or both residence and work permit in a country being a third country national is not an inherent identity marker of a population. The estimate of the irregularized population in a territory fluctuates based on the state's power to define and ascribe a particular status (Kraler & Ahrens, 2023). Dichotomous categorizations of regular or irregular do not provide a proper answer to a spectrum of situations with more grey areas and changing pathways into and out of irregularity (Kraler, 2023), what some describe as a "continuum of in-between statuses" (Schweitzer, 2024) or a continuum of positions (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights., 2011), with many intermediate categories being defined differently by different

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member states. Within the DignityFIRM project, the term "irregular migrant work" broadly refers to migrant workers facing a totally or partially irregular condition of stay and/or employment. What makes their situation 'irregular' is that either their residence or employment in the country (or both) does not fully conform to existing rules and regulations (Schweitzer, 2024).

Some identities make irregularized migrants visibly different from the host population or the majority of co-workers. These differences, such as having a non-majority language, ethnic or cultural background, being a woman, a non-cis-gender person or having a non-heterosexual sexual preference make irregularized migrants vulnerable for discrimination and being bullied by co-workers, higher placed workers and employers. Discrimination on these grounds can also take place by host society institutes, organizations or legislation and policies. Previous research showed, for instance, that both in higher and lower qualified jobs, some jobs are seen as unsuitable for women whereas other kinds of work are qualified as 'women's work', which is accompanied with lower status and payment (Crippa, 2020; Utoft, 2021). Similarly, in research in the agricultural and in the cleaning industry, some jobs were seen as less suitable for migrants from specific countries, following ethnic stereotypes about these groups (Palumbo, 2016; Van Eck et al., 2021). Each specific intersection of these identities lead to a different set of challenges or sources for discrimination, beyond the mere addition of two separated axes of oppression. For instance, undocumented migrants with disabilities face more pronounced and specific challenges and are disproportionately affected by exclusion, as disability policies do not adequately take into account migration status and vice versa (Bonneau, 2024).

Intersecting with their irregular status are other parts of their identity which contribute to their (lack of) agency. Migrants may differ in the resources they have access to, or as Bourdieu calls it, in the kinds of 'capital' they have access to (Bourdieu, 1986; see figure 1 for the definition of the different types of capital).

Definitions of types of capital

Term	*Definition*
Cultural capital	Power derived from sharing cultural attitudes, knowledge and qualifications
Social capital	Power derived from social resources like social position and social network of relationships
Economic Capital	Power derived from financial and material possessions

Figure 1. Definitions of types of capital

Most migrants lack 'cultural capital', they usually were not raised in the same habitus as their employers, which can make it harder to know what informal rules for behaviour apply in their host country. Generally, irregularized migrants are low educated or do not get their skills and studies recognized, which, if combined with a lack of command of the host country's language

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and lack of knowledge of the host countries' institutions and legal infrastructures, will make it harder for many irregularized workers to know, claim or improve their rights or prevent being exploited. This can also be the case for some regular migrant workers if the length of their permit is shorter than the time it will take them to learn about their rights and activate available mechanisms. Irregularized workers differ in having access to social capital: power derived from a social network, from knowing people who can offer support. Migrant workers can also differ in economic capital, in whether they have access to financial means or possessions, which they can use to make their work easier, give a bribe to get a better position, pay for a lawyer, or for a bus ticket to go to a union meeting.

The question of this comparative paper is: how do the interaction of identity markers and resources of (irregularized) migrant workers shape their individual and their collective agency to (influence and) claim labour rights? We study this question in the countries Germany, Italy, Morocco, Poland and Spain, and for the food related sectors agriculture, food processing and food delivery: three sectors in which a relatively high proportion of (irregularized) migrant workers can be found.

2. Methodology

This paper applies an intersectional lens to examine the agency of migrant workers through a comparative qualitative research approach. To this end, our analysis focused on three different food industry sectors - agriculture, meat industry, and food delivery - within the context of five countries, namely Germany, Italy, Morocco, Poland, and Spain. The process of data collection followed a similar methodology in each country. A series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews was conducted with key-informants from the respective food industry sectors, including migrant workers themselves alongside further stakeholders such as trade union representatives, NGO workers, employers' associations, government and administrative officials, civil society organisations, works councils, and legal experts. In total, 167 interviews were carried out between September 2024 and January 2026 with the following distribution across the countries: Germany (17), Italy (40), Morocco (30), Poland (40) and Spain (40). In Morocco, two focus groups were organized with the main actors involved in the agricultural sector, supplementing the overall qualitative dataset with further empirical findings. In addition to the interviews, comprehensive qualitative analyses of policy documents were conducted, examining existing legal frameworks for the formal entitlements and rights gaps relevant for precariously and/ or irregularly employed migrant workers across the four countries. The policy document analysis provided important contextual background information for developing the interview guides and interpretating the interview data.

This paper employs a theoretical framework of agency to structure the generated empirical data, which explores the different manifestations of individual and collective

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agency among migrant workers and how these forms intersect across different national contexts. The study also analysed the role of multiple identity markers, including nationality, migration status, employment status, and gender, in shaping migrant workers' experiences and different forms of power and capital. This methodological approach enabled a comparative analysis of the qualitative data.

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3. Italy: agriculture and food delivery

Despite the very different labour regulatory frameworks of agriculture and food delivery in Italy, migrant workers in these sectors share common features. Both represent low-barrier entry points to the labour market, requiring low skills and no Italian language proficiency. However, many interviewees emphasized that these employments were only temporary stepping stones, with aspirations for more stable and permanent contracts in manufacturing or the restaurant and food processing sectors.

3.1 Individual Agency

Individual agency to improve working and living conditions is shaped particularly by the intersection of social capital: in the country of origin (middle class versus lower classes) and in Italy (ties to local networks or country-of-origin networks); cultural capital: language skills and understanding of social and legal system complexities, closely related to length of stay in Italy; migration status and temporal stability (the duration and security of residence permits). These dimensions interact to create distinct trajectories.

For example, middle-class international students with educational capital can access information through institutional channels and broader networks beyond their ethnic communities, even without Italian language proficiency (ITA_WP5_FG1_2_3; ITA_WP5_FG1_2_4). Long-term residents with stable permits combine improved Italian language skills with expanded networks, enabling more effective navigation of bureaucratic systems and access to better working conditions. On the other hand, newly arrived migrants from lower social classes with precarious migration status face compounded vulnerabilities: limited language skills, reliance on potentially exploitative ethnic networks, and pressure from economic obligations to countries of origin. Finally, workers with stable residence permits but ongoing economic pressures from families and debt obligations find their agency constrained despite formal legal security (ITA_WP5_EXP_2_9).

Individual, and to a certain extent also collective agency, are shaped by the resources or kinds of capital migrants can use. These kinds of capital depend on their intersectional identity markers. On the basis of our research, we identified country of origin/ethnicity, migration status, language and socio-economic status as having influence on the social, cultural and economic capital.

Migrants access employment in both sectors through informal networks structured around shared national origin. These networks operate through word-of-mouth communication within communities of fellow nationals or in reception centres for asylum seekers. In recent years, both sectors have witnessed a significant increase of workers from Pakistan and Bangladesh, who report choosing agriculture or food delivery because these were the only sectors available to them as newcomers with temporary migration status.

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The role of ethnic networks is fundamentally dual. On one hand, they reinforce migrants' capability to enter the labour market by introducing nationals to employers in agriculture or facilitating account-sharing in food delivery. On the other, these same networks can lay the groundwork for extortion and gang-mastering, aggravating the exploitative labour conditions imposed by employers. They serve as gateways to employment but can also be double-edged swords in providing information about rights and legislative systems, as information shared is not always accurate. Networks may connect newcomers with competent civil society organizations and lawyers, but also with incompetent advisors whose services often turn into scams (ITA_WP5_IM_2_3; ITA_WP5_IM_2_6).

Migration status emerges as a critical determinant of vulnerability across both sectors. The precariousness and temporality of migration status directly correlate with workers' sense of pressure to maintain employment despite exploitative conditions. Asylum seekers, migrants who became irregular due to loss of employment, and those holding work or complementary protection permits in the renewal process all experience heightened vulnerability. As one interviewee explained:

> *"I worked off the books because it was the only possibility I had at the time. I was an asylum seeker, and after trying with several farmers, no one wanted to hire me with that residence permit. That's why I accepted to work without a contract, I needed money, and at least this way, I could earn a little."* (ITA_WP5_IM_2_2)

Conversely, migrants holding more stable or long-term residence permits report having greater capacity to change employment or refuse the worst working conditions. The temporal dimension of residence in Italy directly influences migrants' awareness of labour and social rights, including unemployment benefits, health insurance, and paid sick leave. Migrants accept irregular and exploitative working conditions not only from necessity but also from the imperative of maintaining formal working relationships necessary to obtain or renew their permits to stay.

Language proficiency plays a crucial role in shaping access to information and rights. Public administration officers remain undertrained in English and other foreign languages, making Italian language mastery essential for understanding the complexity of bureaucratic procedures required to access residence status, health coverage, unemployment benefits, and social benefits. When migrants lack Italian proficiency, national communities and networks attempt to compensate for this deficit, but information sharing through these channels can be confusing and unreliable.

In food delivery specifically, interviews revealed different degrees of social and cultural capital related to migrants' socio-economic status in their country of origin. Migrants from middle-class backgrounds who obtained diplomas or university degrees, particularly those who arrived as international students, demonstrated better understanding of platform functioning and available services for migrants in Italy. They could exchange information with

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fellow students and access support from university offices. International students, mainly from Pakistan, India, Lebanon, and Iran, reported being less attached to their national communities, developing stronger ties with other international students instead.

In contrast, migrants from lower social classes or rural areas in their countries of origin, with basic or low levels of education, relied almost exclusively on ethnic networks for access to all necessary services: work, housing, information, legal support, and equipment such as bicycles for delivery work.

The nature of work in both sectors, particularly food delivery, reinforces division and competition among migrant workers. The structure pushes them toward accepting exploitative conditions (lower wages, excessive working hours) to maintain access to employment. Working as riders on the streets prevents collective mobilization, as workers remain isolated with limited opportunities to discuss, exchange, and confront experiences with fellow workers. As one Senegalese rider explained: "*You spend most of your time checking your phone, your points... you ask others for advice, you talk to them, but at the end of the day you're on your own.*" (ITA_WP5_IM_2_3).

Competition is particularly acute among newly arrived migrants. An agricultural worker described the phenomenon:

> "*The problem in agriculture right now is that there are many African brothers trying to take your job by lowering the hourly wage. For example, I'm employed by a company that pays me 7 Euros an hour, and African brothers go to my boss telling him 'take me instead of him, I'll ask you for 6.50 Euros an hour.' The problem with agricultural work is mainly ours, the African workers': out of fear, we don't report injustices because employers know each other and exchange information about us.*" (ITA_WP5_IM_1_1)

Social capital manifests in two distinct geographic contexts, each with dual implications:

At Destination: Ethnic networks serve as the main infrastructure mediating access to essential services including work, housing, information, legal support, and equipment. Within Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities particularly, migrants can borrow money to invest in their integration—obtaining housing or address documentation crucial for permits to stay—according to debt systems established in their countries of origin. Shared accommodation among nationals functions as a survival strategy against the inaccessibility of urban housing markets. However, these same networks can facilitate exploitation and dependency.

A Pakistani migrant who arrived in Italy in 2018 after an overland journey across Iran, Turkey, and the Balkans relied entirely on his social networks to identify Pakistani nationals in Turin. There he found accommodation and was directed to a compatriot who managed his onboarding on the Just Eat platform: "*I gave him all my documents, and he told me where to sign. He did everything for me.*" (ITA_WP5_IM_2_10). Another Pakistani interviewee opened a

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Glovo account after working at an Amazon warehouse, following advice from a colleague who, like many others, alternates between food delivery platforms and temporary Amazon jobs during peak seasons (ITA_WP5_IM_2_9).

At Origin: Family and community ties in the country of origin exert contradictory pressures. Positively, they facilitate migration by providing contacts and support during transition. Negatively, they represent burdens that pressure migrants to accept exploitative conditions. The demand for remittances, and in cases like Bangladesh, the need to repay significant debts contracted to fund journeys, prevent workers—even those with stable residence permits—from quitting jobs to increase their skills, seek better qualified employment, or improve housing arrangements.

Cultural capital encompasses both educational background from the country of origin and acquired Italian language proficiency and understanding of local systems. The combination of these elements proves decisive in navigating Italy's complex legal and bureaucratic landscape.

Migrants with longer residence in Italy and stable migration status often develop a powerful combination of social and cultural capital. They establish networks beyond country-of-origin communities, connecting with local communities, other workers, civil society organizations, and unions. This expansion becomes possible through developed knowledge of Italian language and local social and cultural norms.

Educational background from the country of origin significantly influences this trajectory. Middle-class migrants with higher education demonstrate superior ability to obtain information and navigate complex systems to gain effective access to rights. When migrants lack Italian proficiency but possess educational capital, they can leverage other resources more effectively than those lacking both linguistic and educational capital.

Economic capital at destination—material resources such as savings or equipment ownership—reduces reliance on intermediaries and increases bargaining power. However, economic ties to the country of origin can constrain agency. The economic burden of remittances and debt repayment creates pressure that "locks in" workers to exploitative conditions even when alternative pathways might be available.

For migrants from lower social classes, economic capital acquired in the country of origin through debt systems becomes both an enabler of migration and a constraint on future choices. This creates a cycle where initial access to migration depends on indebtedness, which then limits options for exiting precarious employment.

3.2 Collective Agency

Despite interviews not intercepting migrants personally involved in collective mobilization, both sectors have witnessed strikes and protests in previous years. Turin was among the first cities where food delivery workers, including migrants, organized protests and strikes from

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2016 until the pandemic. Between 2020 and 2022, several strikes and mobilizations gathered migrant agricultural workers in the Cuneo area.

In food delivery, informal networks played significant roles in protests and demonstrations, particularly before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. West African and Pakistani couriers organized mobilization around community leaders who invited community members to join strikes and collective actions.

Recent years have witnessed marked decline in recourse to collective struggles or trade unions to assert workers' rights. When facing problems, couriers typically turn to platform help centres. Few interviewed riders were familiar with the city's most active unions (CGIL and USB), or knew of them only for legal support regarding documentation or bureaucratic matters. Even when seeking to defend their rights, migrants increasingly pursue individual rather than collective strategies, relying on lawyers or union consultants accessed through informal networks and community members. Following the consolidation of dual-track employment strategies adopted by platforms, workers have increasingly exercised their rights through individual legal channels rather than collective action.

Migrants with longer working experience in agriculture recognize the importance of protests for improving living and working conditions. Some reported undertaking collective actions on specific issues such as housing:

> "*I thought that the only way to change the situation was to come together and make our voices heard. That's why it's important for us migrants to learn Italian well, so we can communicate in public as well. I'm particularly thinking about the housing issue. When many of us were living in the tent camp, I went with some other companions to the mayor of the city to say that something needed to be done to solve the problem of rents. (...) We didn't solve everything, though some things have improved a bit, the Municipality started to participate in housing support projects.*" (ITA_WP5_IM_1_2)

This quote illustrates how cultural capital (Italian language proficiency) enables public engagement, while social capital (connections with other migrants) facilitates collective action. However, the structural isolation inherent to platform work, combined with intensified competition among workers and the shift toward individual legal strategies, has significantly diminished the space for collective mobilization in recent years.

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4. Poland – agriculture and delivery

In the past two decades, Poland has become a major destination country for labour migration, with migrant workers playing a key role in filling labour shortages in sectors characterised by low wages, high flexibility and weak employment protection. Migration to Poland has been shaped by relatively liberal access to the labour market, especially for citizens of neighbouring Eastern European countries, most notably Ukraine.

Agriculture and platform-based food delivery represent two structurally different yet comparable sectors in terms of migrant labour incorporation. Polish agriculture, particularly labour-intensive subsectors such as fruit production, for years has been heavily dependent on seasonal migrant workers. Employment is predominantly short-term and precarious, often organised through civil law contracts or informal arrangements, with limited access to labour rights, social protection and effective inspection. Migrant workers' dependency on employers is reinforced by informal intermediation, rural isolation, on-site housing and the absence of collective representation.

Food delivery, by contrast, is an urban, rapidly expanding sector embedded in the platform economy, where migrants constitute a substantial share of the workforce. Delivery work functions as an accessible entry point into the Polish labour market for newly arrived migrants, mainly from Ukraine, with a growing share of migrants from East and South Asia. The sector is characterised by an on-demand work organisation, indirect employment through intermediaries, and widespread use of civil law or non-employment contracts. These arrangements generate high income volatility, legal insecurity and limited access to social protection. Despite their contrasting organisational logics, both sectors rely heavily on migrant labour embedded in non-standard employment arrangements that facilitate rapid labour market entry while systematically reproducing structural precarity.

4.1 Individual agency

Individual agency among migrant workers in agriculture and food delivery in Poland is strongly shaped by unequal access to different forms of capital, which intersect with migration status, gender, nationality, language proficiency and the family situation.

At the minimal end of the continuum, agency takes the form of endurance and coping, which is widespread across both sectors. Migrant riders and agricultural workers routinely tolerate excessive working hours, income insecurity, and unsafe conditions. In food delivery, migrants describe working extremely long hours simply to meet basic needs: "How many hours a week do you work? Last week I worked 68 hours. In Warsaw, on average, between 10 and 8 hours a day. Sort of. Well, I mean all seven days, because I work on weekends" [PL_WP5_02, male rider]. Similarly, in agriculture, migrants accept the absence of formal contracts and labour protections as a condition for continued employment.

The language barrier is the main determinant in finding higher-quality jobs and moving between employers. Migrants from post-Soviet countries (such as Ukraine and

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Belarus) often possess higher **cultural capital** because their languages share similarities with Polish, facilitating easier entry into the market: "People from Ukraine, Belarus and those countries have at least a basic understanding of the language, as there are similarities between the languages". (PL_WP5_ 05, male rider). Conversely, Asian migrants working in delivery find the language barrier a significant obstacle even after obtaining Polish degrees.

Another important dimension of cultural capital is knowledge of rights. While some migrants are aware of their rights, they often feel these are not respected, leading them to endure poor conditions out of a sense of gratitude or necessity. This attitude was especially showed among Ukrainian refugees who couldn't go back home:

> *"Do you know your rights as an employee? – I do, but no one respects them. We have what we have. But we are refugees, we should be grateful that they are taking us in for free, we have been here with our families for three years."* (PL_WP5_07, female worker)

This illustrates how individual agency is shaped by intersectional positionalities combining refugee status, family obligations and constrained labour market options.

As migrants accumulate experience and knowledge, agency often shifts toward individual negotiation and pragmatic contestation, particularly in the delivery sector. Migrants learn how platforms operate and adapt their behaviour strategically. Some riders, for example, frame delivery work as a deliberate choice because it allows control over time and effort: "I work as a rider because I just like it. I like cycling and, in addition, I have a free schedule" (PL_WP5_08, male rider) . This reflects the mobilisation of cultural capital, including practical knowledge of platform algorithms and urban mobility, to reclaim limited autonomy within a highly precarious labour regime. Other migrants in delivery engage in temporal strategies to improve income, such as concentrating work during peak seasons: "In winter there are more orders, the rates are higher and the work is more profitable" (PL_WP5_05, male rider).

Social capital help navigating such precarious and seasonal labour market. Migrants rely heavily on internet forums, WhatsApp groups, and chats to exchange information about wages and working conditions in both sectors. Most interactions are within one nationality or at least language group. For seasonal workers, family provides emotional support, as family members, such as sisters or married couples, often travel and work together. Female employees in particular emphasise that this increases their safety and psychological comfort.

At the same time, intersectional constraints related to gender and care responsibilities may limit individual agency. Ukrainian women, especially those who moved to Poland permanently with children, may find their agency limited by a lack of childcare support after losing their home-country networks.

- What are your plans? And is it difficult to find something better?

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- I would say it's both easy and difficult. Because in our situation, we need to find a flat, a school for our child and a job, all at once. We need to sit around for a while, look around, maybe in some factory. There are a lot of factories. We would like something like that.
- What difficulties do you see in achieving this?
- Only that we would have to move so that our child could finish school. It's just difficult because there are a lot of things at once. The season (in agriculture) has already started, so we have to finish it. And then, maybe in the autumn, look for a job. It won't happen that quickly. (PL_WP5_07, female worker)

Another form of social capital used in agriculture are informal networks, previous connections and "knowing the right people". Workers engage in individual negotiation, often mediated by the "drivers". These intermediaries sometimes are distant family members or acquaintances from the home-town or region of origin. Although wage levels and working conditions are usually agreed upon prior to arrival, migrants may attempt to influence their situation indirectly, for example by negotiating informally with employers or by relying on prior relationships. The scope for negotiation is narrow and dependent on workers' perceived reliability, experience, and willingness to return in future seasons. Moreover, migrants selectively return to employers known to offer relatively better conditions, thereby exercising a form of market power. Returning to the same employer next season often allow bypassing the middleman. This strategy allows workers to reduce dependency on intermediaries and slightly improve employment terms, even in the absence of formal rights enforcement.

In the food delivery sector **economic capital** might be a critical resource. Riders with their own scooters or electric bicycle receive more orders from platform algorithms and earn higher incomes than those on manual bicycles: "Those on motorcycles and scooters earn even more because they can get around faster. In addition, people on scooters receive more orders. It is determined by the app" (PL_WP5_ 01, male rider). Some platforms allow "zero investment" by providing vehicles, which serves as a low-entry point for migrants without initial capital. In agriculture, on the other hand, economic power is skewed toward the employer (farmer) who provides accommodation. This creates a high level of economic dependency and limits workers' ability to challenge rights violations, reinforcing an intersectional vulnerability linked to residence, work and housing being controlled by the same actor.

4.2 Collective agency

Collective agency among irregular migrant workers in Poland remains limited and is most visible in the delivery sector. Migrant riders use their **social capital** to form informal, digitally mediated communities, often organised along lines of language, nationality, or ethnicity. These networks function as key reservoirs of social capital, enabling the exchange of

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information about rates, working conditions, and risks. Internet networks also enable account trading, which allows users blocked by the algorithm to return to work or undocumented persons to take up employment: "in riders' chats you constantly see announcements that I buy an account, I sell an account" (PL_WP5_02, male rider) . Such practices demonstrate collective problem-solving and mutual support in the absence of institutional protection.

Despite high turnover and fragmentation, some forms of collective mobilisation have emerged. The delivery sector is weakly unionised, yet worker organisations and spontaneous protests periodically arise, often initiated by migrants themselves. These initiatives reflect an attempt to transform individual grievances into collective claims, even if their sustainability remains limited.

In agriculture, collective agency is far more constrained due to spatial isolation and the absence of unions or NGOs. The lack of intermediating organisations significantly restricts migrants' ability to mobilise **social and cultural capital** beyond their immediate circles. What does emerge, however, are forms of quasi-collective agency, primarily based on shared nationality, language, and repeated seasonal mobility. Migrant workers exchange information about wages, accommodation, and employers through informal channels, including personal networks and social media recruitment posts observed during the fieldwork. Repeated seasonal return to the same employer also has a collective dimension, even when exercised individually. Those workers who are satisfied with their work often return to the same farmer the following season. Over time, this practice can contribute to informal norms regarding acceptable working conditions, as farmers compete for reliable workers in a tightening labour market. While this does not constitute collective bargaining, it represents a market-mediated form of interjectionally structured collective leverage, emerging from aggregated individual decisions rather than organised action.

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5. Morocco: agricultural sector

The agricultural sector in Morocco has created, due to a number of structuring sectoral policies, such as the Green Morocco Plan and the Green Generation plan, a demand for labor-intensive activities. According to the High Commission for Planning (HCP), the sector's contribution to employment in 2023 and 2025 (around 39.7% and 30% of total employment respectively) is the highest (Darhour & Bouzid, 2026). However, the quality of agricultural jobs remains challenged by high informality and hazardous working conditions: physically demanding, high-pressure manual labour (planting, harvesting, packing), extreme heat especially in greenhouses, unconventional working hours, intense use of fertilizers and pesticide, as one irregularized migrant noticed: "We are exposed to chemicals; there is no equipment or protection against this danger. Sometimes we cut fruit, and at the same time other workers pump [spray] the products [...] we breathe this." [MOR_WP5_Agri_9, IM].

A significant number of agricultural workers are employed seasonally for wages without a contract, social insurance, and entitlement to long-term labour benefits. With the growing need for labour, employers have become reliant on irregular migrant work. Irregular migrants are recruited as day or task workers. They fill the labour gaps that native workers do not want and ensure the continuity of production and harvesting in farms. Compared to national agricultural workers, irregular migrants have the same wages and labour conditions, but their residence and employment status both restrict their access to other labour-related benefits (i.e. social security, unemployment and family allowances, etc.). as well as limits their capabilities for contesting hazardous working conditions.

5.1 Individual agency

Our analysis shows that irregular migrants are hired as day workers. So, instead of developing collective ties with their co-workers, irregularized migrants rather compete with each other to get recruited for the job. At the core of their strategies, even when they suffer from poor working conditions, is to adapt and endure, as one migrant stated: "After all, employers create jobs. If there are no bosses, we will be unemployed. At least they create jobs that allow you to live. The boss creates jobs, even if the conditions are difficult." [MOR_WP5_9, IM].

Given their irregular residence status, most irregularized migrants are aware that they are hired on an at-will basis; they have no choice but to accept and endure their working conditions. At the same time, they sometimes take advantage of their unbinding informal employment when they feel unable to endure the workload any further and decide to stay home, rest or leave the job.

> *"I think that when you have residency you have more choices and opportunities. It also depends on whether you have training or not, and your intellectual level. Whereas*

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> *someone who doesn't have residency is forced to do with what they can find, they cling to that". [MOR_WP5 _19,* IM*]*

It is difficult to understand the motives behind irregularized migrants endurance capacity, without considering the motives behind their migration and the cost they are ready to pay to achieve their goals. Migrants initially set out themselves for the adventure of migrating from their home countries to another country and then another adventure of working in precarious and sometimes exploitative conditions for the sake of improving their lives and future. For the sake of reaching out for a better perceived future, irregularized migrants prepare themselves psychologically to surmount all the trials, difficulties they face, as one migrant confirms: "We are prepared for everything, for us this is an adventure." [MOR_WP5_Agri_9, IM]. Another female irregularized migrant interviewee echoed the same idea:

> "You see, sir, I'm going to explain something to you, we migrants, we have reached a level of life, we are no longer afraid of anything. If you are not in the migrant's place, you cannot understand their sufferings and what they are going through". [MOR_WP5_Agri_20, IM].

Even when the work conditions are precarious or exploitative, irregularized migrants accept farm work as long as it provides means for their subsistence. In terms of productivity, the condition of being a migrant makes migrants' work more productive than the work of nationals because migrants live a life of their own; a life without close connection to their families, which affects favorably their productiveness as one labour explained: "Their presence in another country makes them productive and disciplined. There, they have alternatives, but here, they don't." [MOR_WP5_Agri_12, labour expert].

The second form of agency irregularized migrants use goes a little bit beyond the tactic of endurance and individual silence or discontent. It involves engaging in negotiation and individual bargaining strategies by discussing, communicating one's concerns with the supervisors or employers. Generally, workers with more symbolic capital and favorable identity markers, such as migrants who are educated or those with a long work experience and strong networking capacity, are better equipped to bargain for better working conditions and resist labour exploitation. A migrant caporal stated in this respect: "*The best way is understanding, connection between the caporal and the boss. If you convey your concerns, that' s negotiation.*" [MOR_WP5_Agri_4, migrant caporal]. Caporals, also known as supervisors, are entrusted by their employers to recruit, supervise and sometimes pay the team of farm workers under their supervision. Considering, their irregular residence status, a migrant worker observed that the best way for him to stand up for his right is through negotiation and dialogue with the caporal who recruited him. For him, protesting or refusing to work is not a good option. "[...] *revolt doesn't work, telling people not to go to work doesn't work (...) The strategy is to stay at the table to discuss.*" [MOR_WP5_Agri_10, migrant].

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5.2 Collective agency

Findings reveal that migrant workers in the province of Chtouka are organized along nationality divisions as grassroots informal community networks. Aware of their inability to organize and form a union, migrants observed that their irregularity remains a primary obstacle to migrant workers' long-term employment engagement, and thereby to sustained organized collective worker action. For that reason, through these migrant community networks, migrant workers support each other, share information about jobs and employers, build consensus and develop strategies for negotiation with their employers for better wages and conditions. Though they are informal, migrant communities are often structured, involving the agreement among the members of the same community on a president of the community and office members. Migrant community leaders act as intermediaries, representatives of each community group, arranged by nationality. Migrants describe that the recruitment conditions, for instance, are communicated via caporals and community mediators or via WhatsApp groups.

One of the collective actions organized by informal migrant networks, facilitated by WhatsApp groups of each community, is the strike organized by migrants in Leqlia on November 16, 2024 after the attack on and robbery of a person of African origin. A migrant interviewee explained how migrants used collective agency by deciding not to work for two days in order to impose the necessary protections and security for workers:

> "*I remember when there was a small strike related to insecurity, when a migrant was injured, we refused to go to work. Many bosses lost two days. We are demanding security. The authorities have reassured us about it. This strike is not about improving working conditions, but about providing the necessary security, because migrants are victims of criminal attacks.*" [MOR_WP5_Agri_9, migrant]

The least widely used form of collective agency is *unionization*. Irregularized migrants are aware that they cannot be unionized as long as their residence and work status is irregular. Although the Democratic Organization of Immigrant Workers in Morocco (ODTI) was created in July 2012 as an affiliate to the Democratic Labour Organization (ODT), there is still a long way to go in the protection and promotion of the labour rights of migrant workers in an irregular status, including the right unionize. The migrant representative of ODTI we interviewed in Agadir explained some of the activities they undertake in this respect:

> "*We met with the labour inspector and asked him to organize a round table with the employer to discuss issues related to labour rights of migrants, but it was not done [...] The income of migrants, although equal to that of Moroccans, does not allow them to earn a decent living. They earn a bare minimum of 90 DH per day. With that, they cannot pay for a room, they cannot feed and clothe themselves.*" [MOR_WP5_Agri_26, union]

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Our analysis suggests that the intersection of irregularity in residence and employment with many other contextual and systemic structures, (i.e. seasonality of the food related sectors, the high degrees of employment turnover, employers' interests, lack of legal protections, and the low enforcement of labour standards) exacerbates irregular migrant workers' ability to negotiate for better working conditions in the agricultural sector. In this respect, it should be noted that the issue is not a matter of racialized discrimination but rather a sectoral and systemic problem since national agricultural workers' conditions are equally precarious as irregular migrant workers. In a context characterized by the shortage of local agricultural labour and the decrease in its attractiveness, most national farm workers are recruited and mobilized by employers from their villages located far from the province of Chtouka. This situation along with the seasonal/ irregular and flexible nature of agricultural work prevent them from forming strong collective action with effective results in this sector. As for irregular migrants, as long as there are no legal pathways to migration status and to formal employment, irregularized migrants' collective bargaining for better working conditions would remain particularly restricted. For one interviewee the solution to this is: "The first thing we're asking is to make regularization easier and work regulations adaptable." [MOR_WP5 _19, migrant]. For another migrant, their support to collective actions taken by national workers is another way to improve their work conditions: "Regarding working conditions, we cannot take initiatives, Moroccan workers can, we cannot change the laws, we have just arrived, we support the initiatives (mobilizations) that come from the Moroccan workers."

This implies that as long as migrants are irregularized, their struggle for dignified working conditions is exercised through informal, everyday resistance. From an intersectional perspective, irregular migrant women believe that regularizing their administrative status would allow them to obtain well-paid jobs, particularly domestic work. "Here, with the residence permit, I have many opportunities to find work, you see. You can find a good job, a contract, a job where you're well paid, taking care of children, I can find it with the residence permit." [MOR_WP5_Agri_19, migrant]. Hence, irregularity not only explains the concentration of irregular migrants in the agricultural sector but it also forces them to accept its related precarious working conditions (i.e. characterized by informal work and no social or health protections) and restricts their formal collective agency.

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6. Germany, the food processing sector

The meat industry is among the most hazardous industries across national contexts. Data from the German context show, e.g., that accident rates in meat processing exceed those of other sectors, particularly among precariously employed migrant worker categories[1] (Gottlieb & Niediek, 2026b).

While certain risks are inherent to meat processing (e.g., cold temperatures, humidity, sharp tools, slippery floors), these are often intensified by work organization practices such as high line speeds and time pressures. In the German case-study, interviewees described that *"the line speed is really high... and you have to imagine that there's a foreman standing next to you or behind you saying, 'Work faster! faster, faster! or else you're out!'"* (GER_WP2_3, social counseling) This, in turn, also leads to frequent breaches of occupational safety and health norms:

> *"The line [speed] is controlled by the main contractor... and the subcontractors have to work in this speed... otherwise they'll lose their jobs very quickly. And there have been situations where subcontractors changed the workplaces so this speed was doable, but this has also led to an increased risk of accidents. They removed safety guards, simplified safety measures, and things like that..."* (GER_WP2_7, union)

On top, migrant workers were "*always made... understand that, if you have an accident, you won't get any money...*" (GER_WP2_10, employer liability insurance). Another interviewee recounted: *"[Sick leave] did not exist for them. They were always supposed to work."* (GER_WP2_5, healthcare provider). Alongside the high risk of an acute injury, working in the meat industry was consistently described as an experience of slow, constant, and accumulative harm. Our interviewees highlighted workers' *"complete physical and mental wear"* (GER_WP2_5, healthcare provider) and *"total exhaustion"* (GER_WP2_2, church):

> *"It is just a fact that this kills you over time. The repetitive moves, the cold, the burdens on your whole musculoskeletal system that are overwhelming. And also the mental burden, the violence of this work... - I mean, this is about organized violence against living creatures."* (GER_WP2_4, academia)

[1] For instance, until 2020, average yearly accident rates for private industries in Germany were approx. 18/1,000 full-time workers, for the meat industry approx. 50/1,000, and for subcontracted migrant workers, the rate went up to 103/1,000. From Jan. 1st 2021, a new federal law (the Occupational Safety Control Act) banned subcontracting in the "core areas" of the meat industry, which are at the same time the most hazardous job tasks, including slaughtering, de-boning, cutting. Today, meat companies can only use precarious employment arrangements in "non-core" less hazardous job tasks such as packaging and cleaning. Notable, accident rates among those workers, who are still subcontracted, decreased to 35/1,000 full-time workers.

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Hence, precariously employed migrant workers faced a situation in which, de facto, they did not have labour rights (e.g., to adequate protection, paid sick leave, care and compensation in case of a health issue) but, rather, everything depended on their work performance:

> *"In the vast majority of cases, [when there is a health issue] they are layed-off, that much is clear. And those who are provided housing by the company are doubly unlucky, because they lose both their job and their accommodation. So it's not just about unemployment, but also the immediate risk of homelessness... Your stay here in Germany depends on your work, and all benefits depend on work."* (GER_WP2_13, social counselling)

Overall, rather than mitigating risks, the labour regime in the meat industry mobilizes workers' vulnerability and replaceability as disciplinary tools. This context forms the structural backdrop against which migrant workers' agency must be understood.

6.1 Individual Agency

Migrant workers' individual agency in the meat industry mostly appears as calculated endurance and exit. Many workers remain in the job just as long as they deem it tolerable or economically necessary; and they leave once personal goals or breaking points are reached. Industry representatives framed this as unreliability or high turnover; analytically, it can be understood as an agency to endure under constrained conditions.

Some interviewees emphasized goal-oriented strategies: workers tolerate harsh conditions to achieve specific aims, such as financing a house in their country of origin, and leave once these goals are met. Others framed endurance more negatively, as the outcome of limited alternatives and economic pressure. One interviewee, who was from the same national community as the migrant workers in question, explained that workers tell themselves *"this job is sh* but it is better than no job... The fear of having no work – that is the motor that keeps these people going"* (GER_WP2_6, health office).

This form of agency is shaped by intersectional inequities. Migration status, transnational family obligations, socio-economic position (e.g., poverty, formal skill level, literacy, language skills, etc.), and labour market exclusions create pressures and at the same time limit workers' opportunities. This renders endurance and exit forms of agency that are rational but costly. Several interviewees reflected that this dynamic *"devalues [not only the work but also] the subjects who do this work"* (GER_WP2_4, academia):

> *"The conditions in the meat industry - in light of this high turnover, of people who keep saying, 'I'm not doing this job!' - ... This is a sign that working conditions are still far from being livable. [Far from being able to say] that you can lead a normal life as a worker in the meat industry. It is still precarious and exploitative in the sense of physical exploitation, of people who work themselves to death there... And also [in the*

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sense of] the perception that these are all Eastern European workers... who do a job that no one in this country wants to do." (GER_WP2_3, social counselling)

Within the workplace, agency often takes the form of individualized manoeuvring rather than collective action. Interviewees hinted that workers try to secure better job tasks, get allocated to more or more convenient shifts, or get higher pay, e.g., through personal relationships with or informal payments to the supervisors: *"Each one tries to get ahead somehow... to get a better job task."* (GER_WP2_13, social counselling) I.e., there is a hacking order, rather than solidarity and collective action.

The meat industry is characterized by a highly stratified work process. Job tasks, pay levels, and prestige vary significantly and are closely intertwined with nationality and ethnicity, alongside formal skill level: *"The Poles do the slightly higher-quality jobs, while the Bulgarians do the very low-quality jobs.... In slaughterhouses, it is mainly Romanians... Hungarians in particular are very strong in [high-skilled] cutting and also very strongly represented." (GER_WP2_7, union)* This results in differential social capital, as e.g. the above-said Hungarian workers are sought after and can negotiate good conditions; whereas Romanian and Bulgarian workers tend to face precarious or exploitative conditions.

Alongside formal hierarchies, pervasive informal hierarchies shape the working environment, with supervisors/foremen exercising extensive discretionary power: "*They [the workers] have to get the supervisors' permission. I need time, a day off... and mostly the answer is no... Down to the pee break, they [the supervisors] determine everything."* (GER_WP2_13, social counselling) Particularly undesirable tasks were described as tools of punishment and discipline: *"For example, I had a woman [as a counselling client] who didn't take a single sick day in four years. Not one. Then she was sick for a week, and when she came back, even though she wasn't 100% healthy, she was sent to the huge refrigerator to take out the frozen meat. As punishment, so to speak, for not being at work for a week."* (GER_WP2_13, social counselling) *"Yes, of course, the cold store [is used as "punishment"]. [laughs, imitates:] 'You! To the cold store!'" (quote from network meeting, social counsellor).* Within this structure, rights thus become privileges, contingent on the supervisor's good will.

These informal power relations often mirror broader social hierarchies, including ethnic and linguistic divisions: *"Most of the foremen are from the Iraqi community... [while most workers are Romanian]. So, they also exploit this... uh, difference in cultures and languages and so on, so that somehow people are pitted against each other." (GER_WP2_13, social counseling)* Several interviewees noted that shared nationality or ethnic background between supervisors and workers could promote adequate treatment and conditions; while cross-national relations exacerbated workers' predicaments. Recruitment from ever-new countries of origin further sustains this system by ensuring a steady supply of workers with limited social capital: *"It is always new groups of people who come, but they always make the same experience."* (GER_WP2_4, academia) From this perspective, the industry operates through a system of divide-and-rule, which helps keeps people under control by reinforcing

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internal divisions; i.e., having individuals who are themselves members of marginalized groups exerting surveillance and power over others. This has been described in a similar way by other authors (Berntsen et al., 2025; Refslund & Sippola, 2022; Sippola & Kall, 2016). This way, the system also undermines solidarity and collective agency.

6.2 Collective Agency

Against this background, examples of collective agency are rare. One notable exception highlighted in the literature is collective bargaining action in 2021 (Ana & Voicu, 2023), following legal changes that shifted some workers into regular employment (Gottlieb & Niediek, 2026a). However, other institutional mechanisms—such as works councils—continue to show low participation and representation of migrant workers. The upcoming works council elections in 2026 are widely seen as a test of whether this has improved.

The scarcity of collective agency reflects the pervasive power differences facing migrant meat workers. Their position is shaped by intertwined dependencies and precarities, not only due to migration status and employment arrangements, but based on various identity markers, including racialization, gender, (professional, language and literacy) skills, and – as shown above – good relations with the supervisor. Combined, these structures created an experience of *"multiple precarity"* (GER_WP2_4, academia). In this context, migrant workers' limited collective agency must be considered within the broader constellation of actors who profit from and maintain the migrant labour regime, including employers, intermediaries, supervisors, and landlords. These actors often occupy powerful positions, especially in rural regions, where they provide jobs, tax revenues, and and further benefits (e.g., contributions to the city's cultural and social life). Several interviewees characterized these interdependencies as a "tangled web" (GER_WP2_5, healthcare provider) or even "mafia-like" (GER_WP2_2, church) as they reflected on how they increase actors' political influence and insulate against challenges:

> *"They are very generous towards the Catholic Church... And that also has... its effects. And then sometimes you have this conglomerate of, 'Oh no, we don't want to give the region bad publicity, and somehow everyone benefits from it, and somehow it's a win-win situation."* (GER-WP-2, church)

"No one here in the city wants to mess with these people... because it's a completely interwoven system." (GER_WP2_5, healthcare provider) This instrumental and structural power is further reinforced by racialized discourses that frame migrant workers as culturally different, reckless, or naturally suited to harsh work. Such narratives shift responsibility away from employers and normalize exploitative conditions by attributing problems to workers' alleged choices and behaviours, as described also by Holmes (2023).

Taken together, migrant workers' experiences in the German meat industry expose a labour regime that systematically constrains collective agency while channelling individual

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agency into endurance and internal competition. Intersectional hierarchies - embedded in the socio-material work organization, informal power relations, and broader political-economic structures - fracture solidarity and reproduce precarity. Recent regulatory reforms have addressed one dimension of employment insecurity, namely employment relations (Gottlieb & Niediek, 2026a); but substantial and sustainable changes may require additional measures that tackle the structural and intersectional foundations of migrant workers' marginalization (e.g., through the promotion of worker organizing and unionizing across national and ethnic boundaries (Erol & Schulten, 2025)). Without such changes, agency may remain largely individualized, exercised not through voice, but through withdrawal.

7. Spain: food delivery

In Spain's urban delivery sector, migrant workers, particularly in cities like Barcelona and Madrid, have become essential yet structurally marginalized actors. Their agency to claim rights and improve working conditions is shaped by the intersection of identity markers and forms of capital.

7.1 Individual Agency

Individual agency is the dominant modality through which irregular and semi-regular migrant riders in Spain navigate the food-delivery sector. Their strategies reflect patterns already observed in the German case, but adapted to a platform-mediated, urban context and can be described as calculated endurance and strategic exit. For most migrant riders, delivery work is not a voluntary choice but *"the best of the worst options"* available under restrictive labor-migration governance, where administrative barriers, prolonged asylum-processing delays, or employers' refusal to recognize temporary permits exclude them from formal employment opportunities.

Irregularity determines the outer limits of agency. Many riders access platform work by renting subleased accounts, paying up to 30% of their earnings to the legal account holder. This dependency exposes them to algorithmic surveillance, unpredictable income, and hazardous working conditions, including traffic risks, extreme weather, and long hours spent waiting in public spaces without shelter.

Despite the structural constraints, migrant riders exercise individualized maneuvering that centres on temporal and economic accumulation. This involves tolerating exploitation in the short term to pursue medium-term goals - most notably, accruing the legally required years of residence to regularize their status under Spain's *arraigo* system, after which riders frequently exit the sector in favour of jobs in hospitality or other urban services.

This individualized agency, however, often entails self-exploitation: riders commonly work 10–14 hours a day, seven days a week, in expensive urban settings such as Barcelona and

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Madrid, while also sending remittances home. Their capacity to endure is shaped by intersectional constraints, including: limited Spanish proficiency, lack of recognized qualifications, indebtedness, and dependence on co-ethnic intermediaries. The combination of status precarity, economic necessity, and platform architecture, from opaque algorithms to absence of formal protections, restricts realistic alternatives.

7.2 Collective Agency

Collective agency among migrant riders is significantly rarer, more fragile, and more ambivalent than individual manoeuvring. Most collective practices develop not as rights-based mobilisation, but as communitarian infrastructures that serve individual survival needs. Ethnic and linguistic networks (e.g. those often structured around Pakistani, or Venezuelan communities) provide essential information on available accounts, rental rates, delivery hotspots, and housing possibilities. WhatsApp and Telegram groups function as informal communication channels where riders exchange warnings about police checks, share strategies to avoid algorithmic penalties, or coordinate temporary solidarity actions. These networks exemplify a form of practical collective agency aimed at improving material conditions informally rather than claiming collective rights.

Formal collective organising remains extremely limited. Irregularity discourages participation in unions, and migrant riders typically perceive unions as distant or ineffective. A particularly illuminating dimension of Spain's case is the emergence of pro-platform migrant rider associations — such as *Asoriders* — which opposed the Riders Law and defended the self-employment model. Their positioning, documented also in the work of Moares & Betancor Nuez (2023) reveals an alternative, countercultural form of collective action: migrants aligned themselves with platform narratives because platform self-employment matched their needs better than formal employment models, which remained inaccessible due to irregular status. Migrant riders position was in stark contrast to *Riders For Rights*, a mainly native-led grassroots movement that played a decisive role in the political struggle in favor of the deaden labor model, eventually leading to the 2021 Riders Law.

Migrant riders' positioning demonstrates how migrants' needs match with platform demands. By favouring flexibility, avoiding identity checks, and maintaining porous onboarding practices, platforms enabled irregular migrants to work, even if through exploitative and legally ambiguous arrangements. Such configurations underscore that collective agency can take contrasting, sometimes paradoxical forms, supporting rather than challenging the structures that produce precarity.

The kinds of agency described above depend on various elements of intersectionality. Three kinds of capital are particularly relevant for facilitating various kinds of agency: social, cultural, and economic.

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- **Social capital**: strong ethnic ties can facilitate job access and mutual aid but may also reproduce dependency, hierarchy, and exploitation.
- **Cultural capital**: language proficiency enhances riders' ability to access rights, engage with institutions, and pursue formal employment.
- **Economic capital**: material resources - such as owning a bike, having savings, or being able to afford rent without sharing - reduce reliance on intermediaries and increase bargaining power.

These dimensions interact and condition agency. For instance, Spanish speaking Latin Americans with regular or semi-regular status are better positioned to access formal contracts and union representation; riders with more economic stability can afford to wait for regularization under the *arraigo* system rather than accept highly exploitative work; and migrants with strong networks and language skills navigate bureaucratic systems more effectively, thus securing better working conditions and protections.

To these forms of capital we must add other intersectional axes and identity markers, many of which are linked to, yet distinct from, the capitals above. These include country of origin, language, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, and migration status.

Ethnicity (and social capital): Ethnicity constitutes a particularly relevant dimension because it structures access to - and risks within - social capital. Co-ethnic networks often offer the only viable entry into delivery work, providing trust, information, and practical support. However, these networks also generate internal hierarchies: account-holders may charge up to 30% of a rider's earnings or control access to work, transforming support into dependency. Ethnicity also ties riders to obligations originating in their home countries. Family expectations and the pressure of remittances reinforce endurance over contestation, making harsh conditions appear necessary or inevitable. Thus, ethnicity links social capital at destination and origin, revealing a dual dynamic of support and exploitation.

Language: strictly linked to cultural capital, language proficiency is closely tied to country of origin and significantly shapes agency. Spanish-speaking migrants (notably Venezuelans) face fewer barriers, whereas South Asian riders (mainly from Pakistan and Bangladesh) often lack Spanish proficiency, limiting access to information, services, and formal employment.

Country of origin and networks: Most migrant riders enter the sector through informal networks structured around shared national backgrounds. These function as gateways to employment in the absence of formal recruitment. However, their degree of organisation varies, and while some communities foster solidarity, others reproduce opaque practices that reinforce dependency.

Gender: The rider workforce is overwhelmingly male. Gendered norms, safety concerns, and care responsibilities deter women from entering the sector, pushing many into domestic work. Gender thus reinforces occupational segregation and structural inequality.

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Physical ability: Food delivery involves long hours, traffic exposure, and heavy lifting. Riders with physical limitations are effectively excluded, and the absence of protective equipment or accident insurance deepens these vulnerabilities.

Migration status and "degrees of irregularity": Migration status is the most decisive axis of vulnerability. Irregular migrant riders tend to fall into two main groups: i) regular residents without work permits (e.g., many Venezuelan asylum seekers), and ii) overstayers (predominantly from Pakistan and Bangladesh). Irregular and semi-regular riders frequently work under subleased accounts, without contracts, insurance, or access to social protections. Legal invisibility heightens exposure to exploitation, wage theft, and arbitrary disconnection. Even partially regularized migrants encounter employer discrimination, bureaucratic obstacles, and sectoral restrictions, reinforcing a continuum of semi-legality that directly correlates with precarious working conditions.

Taken together, these intersecting dimensions create a labour regime that channels migrant riders' agency into individualized endurance and internal competition, while significantly limiting opportunities for collective mobilisation. Much like the German meat industry - but translated into a digital and urban labour model - intersectional hierarchies embedded in migration status, algorithmic management, socio-material working conditions and community-based dependencies fracture solidarity and reproduce structural precarity. These structural configurations shape how agency can be enacted: they make individualized, short-term coping strategies far more feasible than collective, rights-oriented action. While the Riders Law addresses one dimension of insecurity (employment classification), its impact remains limited for irregular migrants. Without reforms enabling regularization, strengthening enforcement, and supporting cross-ethnic worker organizing, migrant riders' agency will remain predominantly individualised and expressed through long-term endurance rather than collective voice.

8. Conclusions

The question of this comparative paper was: how do the interaction of identity markers and resources of irregularized migrant workers shape their individual and their collective agency to (influence and) claim labour rights? We compared five countries and three food related sectors. Our comparison between countries showed mostly similarities in the kinds of individual agency of irregularized migrants, and in the ways these were influenced by intersectional elements. Collective agency was not commonly found, and in as far as we saw examples, these seemed to be mostly sector and not country specific.

We saw various examples of **individual agency** amongst irregularized migrant workers. As described in the introduction, agency as 'endurance' is of relevance particularly for those who have limited power to change their own, let alone other people's, circumstances. Indeed, in all countries we saw examples of irregularized migrants enduring

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their circumstances. Nevertheless, hardly any of the irregularized workers described themselves as victim of employers, or the system. Instead, we saw various examples of how irregularized migrants dealt with their circumstances through maintaining a sense of autonomy and self-worth. Some would emphasize how they endured their circumstances until they would reach their goal of earning a specific amount of money, or how they endured to be provider of their family. Others derived strength from seeing themselves as strong and as capable of suffering and enduring harsh circumstances.

We also saw various examples of a kind of agency that is in between individual and collective agency – '**quasi collective agency**', aimed at improving individual circumstances, but based on collectively gathered knowledge. Many migrant workers learned from each other how to strategically operate, how to negotiate with bosses and employers and how to deal with algorithms of online platforms and which alternative choices they could make. This kind of agency presupposes that a migrant worker has a social network with which cultural capital can be acquired, as well as that it requires a worker to not be fully dependent on their present position. Moreover, an important way to exercise agency was by 'voting with their feet': by selecting other, better employers and working conditions. In theory, this capitalist market mechanism could lead to employers with the worst conditions not being able to find workers anymore. However, as long as there are migrant workers who have no choice but to endure, quasi-collective agency will not in and of itself lead to structural changes in the labor market conditions for all.

Through **collective agency**, like unionization, strikes, or legal actions, conditions of migrant workers can be improved structurally for all. We found various factors that make it hard for, particularly irregularized, migrant workers to have this kind of collective agency. First and foremost, most migrant workers are dependent on their job and the income they earn with it. This is particularly the case for workers that have economic constraints like debts or families that depend on their income, or those with a precarious migration status, or none at all, particularly when their basic needs such as permits or housing, are tied to their job, leaving them with little choice about whether or where to work.

Particularly the agriculture and the food processing industry are organized in ways which increase this dependency and make it hard to take collective action. We saw various examples in which working conditions are dependent on individual workers' (good) relationships with their supervisors – hindering opposition against employers. Supervisors, often themselves from the country of origin, had the discretion to decide who would be given the heaviest, degrading, or lowest paid work, and even whether it was acceptable to take sick-leave. The result of this is that those who (could) maintain a good relationship with their direct bosses – and employers - could keep their job and obtain higher quality working conditions. This means that individual agency to improve working conditions is based on building social capital with your boss – so on social skills, speaking the same language as your boss, and not opposing them. Simultaneously, the competitiveness in the labour sectors we studied, such as the German meat industry, means that it is hard to build social capital with

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fellow workers and get collective agency, as the work of the one can go at the expense of the work of another.

Indeed, in the only example of a workers strike in Morocco, the strike was not directed against the employers, but at their employers' failure to protect the workers against bandits. In another comparative paper (Legarda Díaz-Aguado, 2025), workers speculated that mostly workers with a secure status, workers that had a lot of experience in and knowledge about the language and rules in the country as well as those embedded in a social network with NGOs, were capable of taking collective action.

Alternatively, the food delivery services in Italy, Spain and Poland are organized through online platforms and workers have no direct dependency relationship with individual employers. In this sector, collective agency in the form of strikes and unionization was more common. Overall, the food delivery services is an individualized sector, in which each worker interacts online with their platform and there is no joint working space. This makes it hard for workers to meet in person, share experiences and team up for joint action – and unionization. The riders' online platforms do, however, provide opportunities for joint action. The relevance of online communication also means that individual workers options for collective agency were limited by their capacity to communicate online in the language of these platforms, usually the language of the host country. All in all, it is hard for migrant workers to use collective agency (Legarda Díaz-Aguado, 2025).

The analysis in this paper gives insight into the reasons why it is hard for migrant workers to change their and their colleagues' working conditions. Some sectors are structured in a way which increases their dependency on bosses while decreasing their opportunities for creating social capital amongst each other. Moreover, there are differences between workers in how hard it is to have collective agency. For some it is virtually impossible because of their nationality/ethnicity, their (lack of) status, and their lack of economic, social and cultural capital. However, all of them show some sort of individual agency, if only in (trying to) improve their lives and that of their families, and the sense of strength and autonomy they derive by being able to make choices, if only that of being so tough to maintain a job that is a threat to their health and wellbeing.

Summarizing the influence of the identity markers and resources, using the lens of **intersectionalities**, we saw that the agency of individual irregularized migrants was most constrained by their level of dependency on their employer in income, housing and migration status. Irregularized migrants who had no formal status were least capable of exercising any kind of agency. Even if irregularized migrants knew that their rights were violated, their dependency on their job was so large that they chose not to claim these rights.

Secondly, the availability of social capital was crucial for migrants' agency. Migrants used their informal connections with their bosses and other employees to obtain crucial information, improve their negotiations and find alternative positions. Migrants' access to social capital proved to be particularly dependent on their (host) language skills and the national/ethnic groups they belonged to; (online) social support networks were mostly

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established along ethnic and language lines. Therefore, not only the absence of migration status, but also the quality and duration of residence and work permits play a crucial role in enabling the accumulation of this social capital, since short-term permits often do not give workers sufficient time to understand their rights, build connections and take action. Additionally, factors like physical abilities, status of the particular group they belonged to, length of stay and having family responsibilities also influenced the kinds of agency migrants had, though most of these factors worked through the aforementioned factors of dependency and social capital. Consequently, policies aiming to improve the agency of irregularized migrants should work through making migrant workers position less dependent on individual employers, granting them longer and stronger permits and through improving the social capital of migrants, with particular attention to those that currently hardly have access to online, informal support networks.

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DignityFIRM Comparative Working Paper

Comparing the agency of irregular migrant workers in Germany, Italy, Morocco, Poland and Spain from an intersectional perspective

ABOUT DignityFIRM

Towards becoming sustainable and resilient societies we must address the structural contradictions between our societies' exclusion of migrant workers and their substantive role in producing our food.

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