

Refugees and asylum seekers in informal and precarious jobs: early labour market insertion from the perspectives of professionals and volunteers

Asylum
seekers in
informal and
precarious jobs

263

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to explore the engagement of refugees and asylum seekers (RAS) in informal and precarious jobs from a civil society actors' perspective. Despite a burgeoning literature on refugee integration and a focus on institutional integration programmes, little is known about the early insertion of RAS into informal and precarious employment as an alternative to subsidised integration programmes, when these are available.

Design/methodology/approach – This article draws on rich qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with social workers, volunteers and other professionals supporting migrants.

Findings – Data analysis shows that migrants' insertion in informal jobs and their rejection of integration programmes may be the result of people's need to access financial capital to cover actual and future needs. Although such an engagement may be criticised for hampering RAS' integration, it can be seen as an important source of agency against insecurity surrounding one's legal status.

Originality/value – This article highlights the importance of legal status precarity in shaping informal workers' agency and perceptions of them, opening up a debate on the relevance of informal work in terms of long-term integration and future migration trajectories.

Keywords Asylum seekers, Agency, Informal economy, Labour market integration, Precarious labour, Refugees, Civil society

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The right to work is fundamental to the social and economic insertion of refugees and asylum seekers (RAS) into European societies upon arrival (Federico and Baglioni, 2021; Kaida *et al.*, 2020). Conditions for integration encompass legal rights and active participation in society, while employment, education, health and social connections within and between groups in the community are identified as domains in which achievement matters (Ager and Strang, 2008). Integration programmes thus aim to facilitate access to the labour market through language tuition, vocational training, guidance, access to preventive health, work placements and mentoring. In this way, policymakers intend to combat barriers related to RAS' [1] early

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labour market insertion; either these concern individual characteristics (e.g. reasons for migration disconnected from job-seeking, limited knowledge of the host country labour market, lack of local language competences, lack of access to social networks, vulnerable health) or structural elements in the host society (e.g. policies regulating access to asylum, recognition of qualifications and skills, dispersal policies, discrimination and hostility across locations) (Dimitriadis and Ambrosini, 2023a). Such programmes are often implemented through the cooperation of public and private organisations, as well as volunteers (Bešić *et al.*, 2021).

A growing body of literature deals with the complexities of and the reasons for which integration programmes fail to enable people to access the labour market, criticising integration policies for reproducing structural inequalities and entrapping migrants in low-wage jobs in the long run (Kaida *et al.*, 2020; Lumley Sapanski, 2021; Ortlieb *et al.*, 2023). This is because integration programmes often entail lengthy vocational training and apprenticeship schemes, as well as low income for beneficiaries. The success of these programmes is further challenged by administrative procedures and continuous policy changes and complex laws. Yet little is known about the early engagement of RAS in the secondary segment of the labour market, characterised by informal economy and precariousness, as an alternative to integration programmes. Indeed, an increasing number of studies indicate that both refugees and asylum seekers are forced to access informal and precarious labour-intensive jobs in domestic work, transport, logistics, agriculture, construction and the gig economy [2] in order to get by upon arrival (Lintner and Elsen, 2020; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2023).

By analysing the perspectives of civil society actors (CSAs) [3] who, professionally or voluntarily, assist migrants in integrating in Italy, this article explores the early involvement of RAS in informal and precarious jobs compared with their insertion into institutional integration programmes. Precarious employment pertains to work involving atypical employment contracts and undeclared labour, weakened employment security, limited social benefits, low wages and high risks of ill health (Vosko, 2000). Although recognising that refugees face barriers in accessing institutional assistance and asylum seekers are often excluded from it, this study aims to investigate how service providers represent RAS as informal workers and the reasons that RAS find themselves in informal and precarious jobs rather than accessing the available integration programmes in the early period of their stay in the host society. Such reasons remain elusive in the aftermath of the arrival of increasing numbers of people seeking asylum in Europe since 2015.

The investigation of this topic through the perspectives of CSAs reflects their important role in enabling the insertion of RAS into the labour market. Several authors show that CSAs promote and implement integration programmes for RAS (Bešić *et al.*, 2021; Verwiebe *et al.*, 2019; Vitus and Jarlby, 2022), sometimes regardless of their legal status (Dimitriadis and Ambrosini, 2022), or in the absence of national policies. In the latter case, professionals are considered to do “integration work” to favour people’s integration and combat irregular employment (Siviš, 2021). Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no studies have yet explored problematisation in the insertion of RAS into informal/precarious jobs from a CSA perspective.

The Italian case is of particular interest for several reasons. Firstly, an unprecedented number of RAS arrived in Italy in the last decade where many of them remain entrapped due to the closure of borders and rigidity in border controls across Europe since 2016. Secondly, the rise of a xenophobic government in 2018 has introduced stricter policies in relation to the possibility that one enjoys international protection (legal status), thus making it harder or impossible to access formal employment in the long run, given the rigid connection between legal migrant status and job contract. These become of greater relevance in the aftermath of the resounding triumph for the far-right Fratelli d’Italia party in the Italian elections and the

formation of a right-wing government in 2022. Thirdly, migrant workers have traditionally found employment opportunities in the Italian informal economy, which is particularly high at the European level (Caro and Danaj, 2023; Dimitriadis, 2023a, 2023b; Quassoli, 1999; Reyneri, 1998). Fourthly, the study of this phenomenon from CSAs' perspectives becomes central as Italy's approach to integration is highly decentralised, in the sense that integration policies are predominantly based on the engagement of civil society actors (Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski, 2021).

Moving beyond views seeing migrants as exploited workers, this article contributes to the debate on refugees' and asylum seekers' involvement in the informal economy by highlighting that informal work may be an active choice. This may permit people to access an income in order to cover their actual needs, cope with insecurity and further precariousness or, in fewer cases, open up opportunities for the future. In addition, negative perceptions of informal work as an active choice can change when considering insecurity in relation to one's legal status and the introduction of restrictive asylum laws. This article also challenges negative views of informal/precarious work in respect of long-term integration, as it claims that not only can informal jobs enable survival, but, in some cases, they can facilitate future plans in the host society or in a new destination despite the impact of the informal economy and precariousness on people's employment and life.

This article is organised as follows. The next section introduces the main theoretical debate deployed in the study. After this, information is provided in relation to the methods used to collect and analyse the empirical material, as well as the context of inquiry. The research findings are then presented, while the last section includes the main conclusions of this study and offers some reflections on the refugee integration debate.

Theories on workers' involvement in informal jobs and recent case studies on refugees and asylum seekers

A great bulk of studies on migrant labour and labour market integration draws on Piore's (1979) classic work on the allocation of labour. Segmented labour market theory suggests that migrants obtain low-paid, dirty, dangerous and demanding (3D) jobs by having lower expectations than natives in relation to the quality of their employment due to the fact that migrants may initially consider their permanence abroad as temporary. Thus they might see indecent, precarious or informal work purely in instrumental terms, as a means of rapidly gaining higher incomes than those in their country of origin, as a way of acquiring better language skills that can increase the possibility of accessing better jobs or accommodation services, or as something temporary before a better opportunity is presented (Anderson, 2010; Dimitriadis, 2023a, 2023b).

In this article, I see the informal economy as "all income-earning activities that are not regulated by the state in social environments where similar activities are regulated" (Castells and Portes, 1989, p. 12). People's participation in the informal economy has been often explained by adopting two contrasting perspectives (Coletto, 2019). On the one hand, scholars sharing a structuralist view claim that informal work entails forms of waged employment undertaken as a survival practice, mostly by marginalised populations (Castells and Portes, 1989; Slavnic, 2010). On the other hand, the neoliberal thesis maintains that the participation of social actors (mainly artisans and entrepreneurs) in the informal economy is the outcome of a rational choice to evade the restrictions imposed by burdensome states. According to the so-called "exit option" or reinforcement perspective (De Soto, 1989), own-account informal workers exit the formal economy voluntarily in order to save money, time and effort in relation to formal bureaucratic procedures.

Instead of seeing informal work as the result of deprivation or difficulty accessing the formal economy, studies on the micro level highlight that engagement in informal work can

be connected to individuals' desire for autonomy and economic flexibility (Coletto and Bisschop, 2017), and can be shaped by communitarian social relations in which individuals are embedded (Williams and Round, 2010), and professional and gender identities (Snyder, 2004). When analysing the migrant population's involvement in the informal economy, several scholars have added that informal work is not only chosen as a means for survival, but it can be supplementary to insufficient income (Boels, 2014; Recchi, 2021). In addition, informal work can be the result of people's inability to meet formal work criteria (e.g. language skills, qualifications), their lack of citizenship rights (either the impossibility of renewing one's stay permit or refusal of an asylum request) (May, 2020), work experience in the receiving society, and direct professional and social networks with native workers (Aydiner and Rider, 2022). It can also be linked to the desire to escape feelings of being exploited (in the case of independent workers), trauma linked to enforced migration, or to meet gender conventions and expectations (e.g. men who do not want to lose the breadwinner status within the household or women who aspire to feel free and affirm their autonomy) (Vianello and Sacchetto, 2016). Family plans and decision-making (e.g. when people engage in transnational work trips to increase income) can also be on the basis of migrants' involvement in the informal economy (Dimitriadis, 2023b; Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009).

In recent years, some studies have focused on RAS as informal workers without clearly entering the theoretical debate on the informal economy as presented above. Most scholars suggest that RAS' engagement in informal jobs equates to exploitation. Failure to access the formal labour market or integration programmes forces asylum seekers to get informal jobs in order to secure an income and make ends meet (Lee *et al.*, 2020; May, 2020; Pelek, 2019; Simsek, 2020; Siviş, 2021; Xypolytas, 2018). In contrast, RAS' opportunities to integrate into the formal labour market become higher when local governments and civil society actors autonomously implement vocational training programmes in the absence of integration policies (Siviş, 2021), or when people initiate informal economic entrepreneurial activities (Simsek, 2020). However, informal entrepreneurship is often considered ineffective in enhancing integration in terms of relations with the state and the locals (Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2019).

Before moving to the analysis of the empirical material, it is necessary to contextualise this case study and account for the methods that have been used to collect data.

Context of inquiry

The provision of services for the integration of (forced) migrants in Italy can be characterised as decentralised, as the national government defines the minimum standards and key priorities of people's insertion in the society while regional and local institutions promote and implement a series of measures and policies. Services for forced migrants' integration are often provided through third-sector organisations (Scholten *et al.*, 2017). In this context, the goal is to promote inclusion and integration through access to the labour market, basic rights and welfare services (e.g. housing, healthcare), education, language courses and civic participation.

Labour market integration is implemented through job training and placement services offered to RAS with the aim of increasing people's self-sufficiency (Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski, 2021). Integration programmes consist of short-term internships (for three to six months) with an allowance ranging from 400 to 500 euros per month. Nowadays, this is subsidised by the use of state funds for refugees and holders of international protection status, while asylum seekers and people outside the institutional system of reception are privately funded (Dimitriadis and Ambrosini, 2023b). The former enjoy unlimited access to the labour market, whereas asylum seekers are allowed to work only from the sixtieth day after submission of the application for international protection (Federico and Baglioni, 2021).

Since 2002, the reception and integration of RAS in Italy has been provided within the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) network, run on a voluntary

basis by municipalities with the possible engagement of third sector organisations (Law n. 189/2002). People have been offered accommodation in single unit apartments or group occupancy facilities and other services aimed at their integration. In dealing with increasing arrivals of people seeking international protection since 2015, and faced with municipalities' reluctance to be involved in the reception of RAS, the Italian government introduced a complementary reception mechanism. Law n. 142/2015 provided the opening of emergency reception centres (CAS) for those who could not be hosted within SPRAR facilities upon arrival. These new structures are managed by various private actors, namely non-governmental organisations (NGOs), hotel owners and other conventional employers, without the engagement of municipalities, and are designed to offer temporary stay. However, CAS became the main reception facilities, hosting between 75 and 80% of asylum seekers in Italy in the period 2014–2018 (Campo *et al.*, 2020). Asylum seekers remain at CAS locations for many months or some years while awaiting a decision on their asylum application. Therefore, CAS reception facilities were initially intended to align the quality of services for RAS' basic needs and integration with those offered by the SPRAR system (then renamed SAI).

However, RAS' integration pathways were challenged due to the implementation of new restrictive asylum policies. Law n. 132/2018 (the so-called Salvini or security decree) excluded asylum seekers from ordinary reception facilities, thus making CAS the only structures that can host them until the final judgement is made on their application. In other words, only people with legal status can access the SAI network, where they can stay for six months, or for one year in a limited number of cases. The same amendment also provided a reduction in the daily allowance that covers asylum seekers' needs, from 35 to 20 euros per day, which additionally limited the integration services previously offered in CAS centres, such as Italian language courses, orientation to the labour market, and psychological and medical assistance. Lack of integration services while waiting for the decision on asylum requests implies that economic integration amongst refugees and holders of international protection status can be hard to achieve through a six-month project offered by the SAI network (Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski, 2021). Moreover, with the new amendment, the possibility of accessing and maintaining the status of humanitarian protection was narrowed only to those facing serious health problems, coming from countries suffering natural disasters, or those who have been abused. People who are not able to prove that they have suffered persecution or come from unstable or non-democratic countries in which they are equally at risk are now excluded. Therefore, the number of refused asylum seekers has increased over the years (Dimitriadis and Ambrosini, 2022), including both newly arrived people unable to access international protection and holders of international protection who failed to renew their status or convert it into a stay permit for work reasons.

Methods

I draw on data collected within the Migration Governance and Asylum Crises (MAGYC) H2020 project focussing on the barriers that RAS face to integrate in the host society and their practices to cope with structural constraints. Empirical material was collected through 45 semi-structured interviews with service providers (Table 1). The important role of civil society in facilitating the settlement and integration of RAS in recent years (Dimitriadis *et al.*, 2021; Glorius and Doomernik, 2020; Kourachanis *et al.*, 2019; Moskovich and Binhas, 2015) led me to explore RAS' engagement in the informal economy and precariousness through the perspectives of service providers. The sampling was purposive. I initially contacted some representatives of pro-migrant organisations known to be active in providing services to RAS. These people then introduced me to other colleagues or people engaged with migrants. The selection of research participants was based on the heterogeneity of types of CSA and

Table 1.
Research participants

Services providers	Number
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	19
Female	26
<i>Profession/role</i>	
Reception centre managers	6
Social workers	9
Volunteers	11
Experts of Third Sector Organisations (TSO) in integration programmes	9
Employee of public employment centre	1
Employee of employment agency	1
Trade Unionists	5
Lawyers with expertise in immigration	3
Total	45
Source(s): The author's own work	

their services towards migrants. However, the sample does not fulfil statistical representativeness criteria. These data were triangulated through eight interviews and informal discussions with RAS, and ethnographic material collected through instances of non-participant observation at a migration service help desk and an informal reception facility.

Research fieldwork was carried out in the region of Lombardy in Northern Italy, which is the locomotive of the Italian economy and where the majority of migrants are concentrated (almost 22% of the migrant population living in Italy reside in Lombardy). In addition, 45.6% of asylum seekers and people under humanitarian protection reside in Northern Italy.

Interviews were conducted from May 2019 to May 2021 and typically lasted between 40 min and two hours. Those conducted before March 2020 took place face to face in public spaces or at the venues of associations, whereas most of those done after the pandemic outbreak were carried out via video communications platforms or telephone. All participants were informed about the scope of the research and gave their consent to participation, audio registration and processing of personal data. The process of data collection and analysis was approved by the ethics committee of my university.

Answers were anonymised, coded and analysed using QDA Miner, which facilitates the thematic analysis of qualitative data. The coding process for the whole research project was both data- and theory-driven (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Overall, 19 themes and 64 subthemes were produced. The analysis in this article concentrates on coding that relates to service providers' perceptions of the involvement of RAS in informal and precarious employment. In particular, empirical evidence derives from the theme called "informal and precarious jobs" and from seven subthemes, namely "motivations", "agency", "exploitation", "contextual factors", "policies", "COVID-19 implications", and "gender".

In the following lines, I explore how service providers represent RAS' involvement in informal/precarious work compared with their insertion into available integration programmes in the earlier stages of people's stay.

Findings

Talking about RAS' insertion into informal and precarious jobs, the great majority of interviewees perceive that such employment indicates deviation from what is considered to be decent work—that is, productive work delivering a fair income, security and better prospects for social integration (International Labour Organisation). Such depictions were

seen across any economic sector to which participants referred. This is to say, insertion into odd jobs, street commerce, cleaning services, construction, and the platform economy (e.g. riders in the delivery sector) was linked to poor working conditions and exploitation. However, there were a variety of answers in relation to the motivations in individual cases to exit or reject integration programmes and access informal economy and precarious employment. These are analysed in the following sections.

Migrants' needs and short-term plans leading to informal jobs and social exclusion

Some professionals perceived RAS' involvement in informal and precarious jobs as a choice driven by people's personal plans. In this respect, the informal economy was often seen as the result of RAS' voluntary exit from or rejection of integration programmes:

There were people that asked you to change the hour of the course because they said "I have to go to sell my stuff" ... Then, there're other people who abandon vocational training because they find an odd job. This is, let's say, "I prefer the egg today rather than the chicken tomorrow". (Director of a vocational training institution)

These [informal] jobs bear little fruit over the long-term because people need to renew their stay permit sooner or later or, how to say, to find a job that enables them to have a contract which, in turn, can allow them to access housing. I have to say that there's a big flow of people into jobs as riders. It's not exactly a regular job, because it's close to exploitation, to gang mastery [*caporalato*]. By becoming riders, these guys prefer gaining much more money compared to that in an integration programme, although an [integration] project is a bit more structured and leads to a more secure and durable outcome. (Reception centre manager no. 3)

Underestimating the importance of vocational training and internships in the long-term integration process and opting for an informal job is perceived as a choice that responds to present needs and jeopardises one's settlement in the host society. According to the above interviewees, informal and precarious jobs by no means lead to the possibility to acquire skills, increase one's employability (and possibility to access the formal labour market) and enable maintenance of legal status. Due to the rigid connection between migrants' formal employment and legal status (Bonizzoni, 2017), RAS' engagement in the informal economy can result in irregularity of stay, which can put at risk people's plans to settle into the Italian society and contributes to further socioeconomic exclusion and insecurity. Instead, getting a job contract through an integration pathway suggested by professionals and being inserted into the formal labour market are perceived as practices oriented towards the future that can secure people's settlement. The second quote also pays particular attention to the exploitative nature of digital platform jobs that are carried out in person (e.g. delivery services). As highlighted in recent studies, such jobs are considered to entail poor working conditions (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2023). Seeing involvement in the informal economy as a result of short-term planning of RAS' lives, the following participant focuses on some individual characteristics shaping decisions to participate in informal and precarious jobs:

Many people are "happy" to be riders, because this [kind of job] is objectively one of the first keys to enter the world of work today in Italy. However, they [RAS] may have different skills that they could enhance by putting effort into and orienting themselves towards an integration path that is certainly longer. (Social worker no. 4)

Engagement in precarious jobs is perceived by many interviewees as an easy way to access the labour market, which indicates a lack of patience, determination and long-term planning on the part of the (potential) beneficiaries of integration projects. This recalls Verwiebe *et al.* (2019) study showing that self-discipline, patience and persistence are key elements for successful job research amongst refugees. Being inclined to gain money immediately upon arrival, RAS may not leverage their own skills and qualifications, thus undermining the

success of integration into the host society. Reproducing similar argumentation, another professional adds a cultural dimension to the discussion:

I think this [rejection of integration programmes and involvement in the informal economy] is partly due to a cultural dimension; it's not about what is right or wrong. When I started dealing with foreign people, I realized that the language codes were a bit different. I was talking about an integration programme or path, assuming that that stuff was understandable. But, we [Italian professionals] have this concept of the project [integration programme] that is the development of something that starts and gets to something . . . instead, you often realize that you are dealing with people's needs that do not correspond to the necessary time [to develop a programme] (Reception centre manager no. 3)

This quote suggests that rejection of structured integration programmes and insertion into the informal economy derive from a cultural discrepancy between professionals and RAS. Service providers may perceive that RAS find it difficult to comprehend the importance of education, vocational training and internship projects in terms of long-term integration. A similar finding was presented by [Lumley-Sapanski and Dotsey \(2022\)](#), who argued that local politicians used racialized preconceptions of African people and presumed a lack of cultural compatibility to participate in structured integration paths proposed by the local municipality. Here, such an incompatibility is perceived to drive migrants into informal jobs. Once again, people's integration paths are represented as being dependent on their ability to dedicate adequate time to vocational training schemes, as this is in contrast to the needs and plans of informal workers. In a similar vein, another professional claims:

Overall, even if I generalise too much, it is also the issue of relationship of trust [between professionals and beneficiaries]; this is fragile. We're trying to build a relationship of trust, in the sense that we [professionals and beneficiaries] are working in the same direction, that we have the same intentions. But the other part calls our intentions into question. (Social worker no. 3)

According to a few participants, people's decision to reject an available integration programme and access the informal economy may therefore be due to the lack of trust amongst RAS towards CSAs ([Hanley et al., 2018](#)). It seems to be hard to build trust between professionals and beneficiaries. It could also be argued that the limited time (six months) of hospitality for refugees at SAI reception facilities may discourage the construction of such a trusting relationship. Distinctions on the basis of legal status are also discussed in the following section.

Migrants' legal status as a factor shaping perceptions of informal work and the impact of law changes

Representations of RAS who are engaged in the informal economy may vary according to their legal status. This becomes clear in the account of the following participant:

Such a trajectory [getting an informal job] is pointless for those at SAI facilities, because they really lose time [when working in the informal economy]. They are offered only six months of hospitality, in a few cases one year. We're trying to make them understand the importance of undertaking a formal integration pathway and then doing an internship, even if this is not aimed at hiring. But, in any case, three months of internship is better for one's CV than working in the black market. If you work irregularly, you don't have the possibility to prove your skills, you cannot have a lease agreement. [. . .] As far as those living in CASs are concerned, we are less rigid since everything is so precarious. They're people who have little likelihood of accessing the SAI system [by obtaining a refugee or international protection status]: almost 10 per cent of them. Most of them are destined to lose their stay permit and right to stay at institutional facilities. This [informal economy] can give them the chance to put aside some money in order to survive when they exit reception facilities or to meet the expenses of a trip (Reception centre manager no. 1)

This is a telling quote revealing that informal jobs can be seen differently amongst those whom legal status is not still recognised. This view was shared by the majority of the research participants. In other words, asylum seekers' involvement in informal work is considered an acceptable alternative solution to available state-funded subsidised jobs since the probability of receiving a positive decision on one's asylum request is very low. CSAs may therefore perceive the informal economy as something that enables migrants to get by in the host society or to activate new mobilities (Fontanari, 2018; Sanò and Della Puppa, 2021). In this respect, two volunteers gave evidence about how restrictive asylum policies inform asylum seekers' decisions to get informal jobs:

All these Decrees have increased precariousness without reducing the number of people who are present in the [Italian] territory, so these laws create precarious conditions for loads of guys who don't even know where to sleep . . . (Volunteer no. 7)

According to our researcher [person collaborating with the association], the probability of finding a job at the end of ten or so, or about a hundred hours of vocational training is very low; and this is known [amongst RAS]. So, they [RAS] prefer a precarious activity that enables them to make ends meet and yet send 10 or 20 euros home. In my opinion, many of them are disheartened and disappointed due to long vocational training courses that we [association] suggest to them. Since the possibility of accessing international protection doesn't exist any more, they're terrified and [. . .] opt to accept on-the-call jobs rather than an internship. (Volunteer no. 8)

The above quotations suggest that restrictive access to asylum may lead more people to get informal work rather than opt for an integration programme. There is also uncertainty surrounding the possibility of renewing their legal status, thus blurring distinctions between those who hold a (temporary) stay permit and asylum seekers. In other words, the difficulty of renewing the stay permit shapes CSAs' representations of informal work. Perceptions of informal work and motivations to reject an integration programme are also related to other structural elements such as job offers. The Italian labour market's limited capacity to offer (good) jobs seem to constitute a deterrent for investing resources into an integration programme. This is confirmed in a recent study claiming that the result of participation in vocational training offered through the SAI system in a prosperous Northern Italian city was rarely a permanent job (Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski, 2021). The idea that informal jobs may offer people the means to face uncertainty and precariousness in the present and in the future regardless of their legal status is also reflected in the following quote:

We have different views [within the association] about this point [access to informal jobs]. The service [I offer] to them [RAS], all those who have a regular job, is to help them with any problem they might have in relation to their job contracts. [. . .] But I also tell the guys I assist that they can probably do any irregular job because it is better to have a black job than not to work, because, in any case, having money in their pockets possibly guarantees them finding a good place to sleep, to find other solutions in sight . . . (Lawyer no. 3)

They [RAS] often astonish us, because when the reception period ends for them, we realise that they have already organised their move in France to join a cousin of theirs who has already found an odd job for them. (Reception centre manager no. 6)

Among a few participants, therefore, informal employment is not only perceived as preferable to unemployment amongst RAS and a means to get by, but it can open up new opportunities in the future. For instance, accumulation of financial capital may enable onward migration (Ahrens *et al.*, 2016) or entrepreneurship (Bizri, 2017; Kloosterman, 2010) that offer better opportunities for integration. Although entrepreneurship is often dependent upon one's economic position prior to arrival in the host country (Simsek, 2020), onward migration becomes possible through the intermediation of social networks.

In the last analytical section, I briefly discuss how gender and the recent COVID-19 pandemic interplay with involvement in informal jobs.

Informal work amongst female RAS and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic

In the previous sections on data analysis, most participants referred to male RAS when talking about integration programmes and precarious jobs, as the great majority of newly arrived people since 2015 were men [4]. However, some respondents made reference to female RAS, claiming that women's insertion into informal and precarious jobs and their failure to access or complete integration programmes can also be due to the gendered structure of integration measures and childcare responsibilities.

Vocational training courses were not at all designed for female asylum seekers. There were training courses for electricians, for mechanics, for purely male jobs. Furthermore, the other difficulty is that they [women] often have to take care of the children and they do not even manage to have the time, the opportunity to go to school to learn Italian . . . Some of them occasionally find some odds jobs as cleaners. (Social worker no. 6)

Here, precarious and informal jobs in the secondary segment of the labour market seem to be the only alternative to unemployment and social marginalisation. In previous studies, the failure of integration programmes amongst women has been considered to enhance exposure to trafficking and exploitation (Caroselli and Semprebon, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic is also represented by almost all research participants as a catalyst for people's access to informal and precarious jobs, mainly as platform workers in the delivery sector. In this case, though, RAS' insertion in informal work was the only solution to access an income since most integration programmes were suspended. The following quote explains this trend:

Everything stopped: the internships were suspended, some of them started again in the following weeks, but at the end they were cancelled. None of the [integration] projects we had activated as internships with hiring purposes was completed. Our labour agency partner said: "after the lockdown there will be nothing left of what was before". We start from this point trying to give back a minimum of this awareness to the beneficiaries. (Reception centre manager no. 3)

Unfortunately, we saw many layoffs or layoff benefit schemes [*Cassa integrazione*]. [. . .] This meant that the mood and expectations [of asylum seekers] regarding their proactive insertion as aware citizens dropped significantly. (Reception centre manager no. 5)

As shown in recent research, potential employers of RAS became more cautious in their hiring decisions after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bešić *et al.*, 2021). The success of integration programmes was undermined because of lockdowns and poor performance of local economies. Therefore, increasing insecurity amongst RAS led to setbacks in integration processes (Falkenhain *et al.*, 2021), paving the way for RAS' insertion into the informal economy in a context of poor state policies and regulations in relation to migrant labour (Berntsen and Marino, 2023).

Conclusions and discussion: RAS' early insertion in informal/precarious jobs and the meaning in terms of long-term integration and future plans

In this article, I have explored CSAs' perceptions of refugees' and asylum seekers' early involvement in informal and precarious jobs rather than undertaking institutional integration paths. The analysis of data advances the theoretical debate on migrants' engagement in the informal economy on the one hand; on the other, it opens up a discussion on the link between informal/precarious jobs and long-term integration or/and future migration trajectories.

Previous studies on RAS' engagement in the informal economy mainly represent RAS as exploited workers facing social exclusion due to the precariousness or lack of legal status and the lack of integration policies (Lee *et al.*, 2020; May, 2020; Pelek, 2019; Simsek, 2020; Siviş, 2021). In these studies, people are considered to fail to gain access to job opportunities in the formal realm of the economy as a result of a set of barriers in relation to RAS' personal characteristics and the institutional and legislative contexts. Instead, the perspectives of professionals and volunteers assisting newly arrived people show that some RAS can opt to access informal and precarious jobs as a way to meet their actual economic needs or to sustain future projects. Although such engagement is often criticised for trapping people due to the irregularity of their legal status and leading to social exclusion, it is argued that the rejection or abandonment of integration programmes can be seen as an active choice. Moreover, representations of informal work amongst RAS may be shaped by the RAS' legal status. This means that informal work can be considered a valuable solution for asylum seekers, as access to legal status is generally not likely; in this case, participation in integration programmes is considered useless. Perceptions of people's involvement in the informal economy can also change when laws further limit the possibility of accessing a stay and work permit. However, distinctions based on legal status can be blurred when taking into consideration people's desires or future plans (e.g. desire to move to a new destination, access to informal jobs as means to increase incomes). This further complicates the debate on the relationship between motivations for getting informal jobs and migrants' legal status.

In light of the above research results and theoretical contributions, it is possible to reflect on RAS' early insertion in precarious jobs, their long-term integration and future migration trajectories. According to the view of some participants, integration programmes are the only way to facilitate RAS' integration in the long run. Insertion in vocational training and investment in language courses are factors that can enable people's successful settlement in the host society. Yet this view is not shared by all interviewees. Instead of seeing labour market insertion programmes as tools for integration, it is suggested that informal and precarious employment may be considered as an option securing survival in the host country and enabling mobility to a new destination. This can be relevant for other countries with restrictive asylum policies and segmented labour markets. In a few cases, as informal work often permits higher incomes than are offered by integration programmes and regularisation of legal status becomes possible through extraordinary amnesties like the one promoted in Italy (Bonizzoni and Hajer, 2023), accumulation of financial capital can open up opportunities for long-term integration. Yet the implications of informal and precarious jobs in workers' lives should not be neglected (Dimitriadis, 2023b; Fouskas, 2018), or the need to reconsider the functioning and efficiency of state integration programmes.

Both the debate on RAS' motivations for insertion into informal and precarious jobs in the early stage of their stay and that on integration outcomes in the long run would benefit from a thorough investigation of the perspectives of informal and precarious workers themselves and their plans, desires, aspirations, and integration trajectories. Future research should also investigate the relevance of RAS' subjective meanings associated with their insertion in the informal economy, as highlighted in previous research (e.g. gender conventions, desire for autonomy, social relations), as well as how work experience and different social and demographic characteristics amongst CSAs shape their perceptions of precarious and informal labour amongst migrants.

Notes

1. While refugees are guaranteed a series of entitlements in relation to their access to labour markets (e.g. integration programmes), asylum seekers are conferred fewer rights and experience different treatment depending on the country they enter, including time limits on accessing formal employment (Federico and Baglioni, 2021).

2. Despite the existence of a contractual agreement between registered workers and digital platform providers, it has been argued that labour platforms formalise only some aspects of gig work while perpetuating aspects that are common in informal work, such as uncertainty of income, overtime, control over the labour process, opaque policies regarding the collaboration between workers and platforms and misclassification of workers' employment status (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2023; Veen *et al.*, 2020).
3. By CSAs, the author intends non-governmental organisations (NGOs), associations, trade unions, religious institutions, social movements, activist networks and independent supporters.
4. According to the Ministry of Interior, the number of arrivals by sea in Italy has been increasing since 2011 (62,692) due to turmoil in Northern Africa (Arab Spring). Since 2014, over a period of four years, this number has been much higher (170,100 in 2014; 153,842 in 2015; 181,436 in 2016; 119,369 in 2017). Only a few thousand people entered Italy by sea in the following years (23,370 in 2018; 11,471 in 2019; 34,154 in 2020), while a new increasing trend characterises 2021 (67,040), 2022 (105,140) and 2023 (127,207 up to September 15). Over the years, Tunisians, Syrians, Eritreans, Ivorians, Guineans, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis have been the most numerous national groups amongst newly arrived people.

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