

# Exploring labour transformations in platform work through the lens of informal work: a new framework of analysis

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In this article, we aim to propose a new analytical framework for examining (in)formal work and its transformations induced by digital labour platforms (DLPs). The article also introduces the special issue on the entrenchment between DLPs and informal work.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We reconstruct the key theoretical frameworks and concepts used in recent research addressing precarization, casualization and informalization effects of DLPs on work, and we reflect on how the debate on informal economy and work can advance understandings on platform work, and how research on DLPs can contribute to the debate on the informal economy, informal work and hybridization of work.

**Findings** – The analytical framework consists of four core principles that, in our opinion, should always be present in the analysis of platform work and informal work: (1) the need to move beyond the binary distinction between formal and informal work by adopting a hybridization-of-work perspective; (2) the importance of clarifying how informality is defined; (3) the need to consider informal work as an integral component of broader labour transformations; and (4) the importance of fostering dialogue between the global North and the global South. We also identify three central dimensions of analysis: the individual perspective, the relational dynamics and the role of institutions in shaping informality. While each of these dimensions offers valuable insights on its own, it is crucial to take into account how they interact.

**Originality/value** – The proposed framework aims to advance the understanding of the erosion of standard employment, the changes in the informal work and its relations with the formal parts, moving beyond the dominant narratives of precarization and informalization that prevail in much of the existing literature.

**Keywords** Informal economy, Informal work, Undeclared work, Informalization, Hybrid forms of work, Precarization, Uberization, Platformization, Digital labour platforms, Gig work

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

In a recent publication on the effects on digital labour platforms (DLPs) on labour, Ludmila Costhek Abílio put forward the idea that the category of employment needs to be reconfigured in order to better understand the latest transformations in the world of work. Using the term of *uberization* to analyse such reconfigurations, she wrote:

Taking *uberisation* as a new form of work management, control, and organisation [...] involves the understanding that informality was never an exception, but has now been established as the norm and a horizon for labour relations; this means thinking about how the employment category is being reconfigured, and recognizing that uberization is not associated with formal employment, but permeates and modifies it (Abílio, 2023, p. 147).

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This article seeks to respond to Abílio's invitation by proposing an analytical framework aimed at better interpreting the relationships between DLPs, regular (or formal) and informal work. In fact, it seems to us that the introduction of DLPs makes it even more apparent that we need to rethink the analysis of work, completely overcoming the dichotomy between formal and informal work. As we will see in the following pages, the theoretical and analytical path to overcoming this dichotomy began several years ago, with clear progress in terms of knowledge and understanding of the informal work. Despite this, informal (or undeclared) work is very often treated as something "other" than regular work in the literature, and especially in the studies on the effects of DLPs on employment. In our view, instead, the advent of DLPs brings regular work into close contact with informal work in many sectors and in many respects, providing an opportunity to take further steps forward in the analysis and understanding of these forms of work and their relationship with regular work and the economy.

While acknowledging the importance of studying the erosion of standard employment and labour rights, we argue for decentring analyses of DLPs away from a narrow focus on standard employment towards frameworks grounded in debates on informality. This shift is particularly necessary because DLPs operate in sectors and occupations that have long been characterized by high rates of informality and persistent or growing forms of undeclared work in both the global South and the global North. This need is even more important when considering that undeclared work has increased in some areas of the world with the consolidation of economic globalization, while the largest share of the global workforce that works informally is the result of the development of a certain model of capitalism that considers the processes of labour flexibilization as factors that contribute to both the increase in employers' economic profits and the control of the labour factor (Agarwala and Tilly, 2025).

Going beyond literature emphasizing how DLPs exacerbate processes of precarization and informalization, our contribution lies in advancing an analytical framework that brings new conceptual clarity to the study of platform work. We argue that research in this field should be anchored in four foundational conditions: first, overcoming the rigid formal-informal divide by embracing a hybridization-of-work perspective; second, explicitly addressing the contested definition of informality; third, recognizing informal work as a constitutive element of broader transformations in labour; and fourth, promoting a sustained dialogue between scholarship and experiences from both the North and the South of the world. Building on these principles, we further propose three key analytical dimensions – the individual level, the relational dynamics level and institutional configurations level – that together shape how informality emerges and evolves within DLPs. While each level provides important insights, their interplay is essential for understanding the complexity of platform-mediated labour transformations. In this sense, it becomes evident that such an analytical approach could also contribute to the advancement of traditional theoretical debates on informal work and economy.

The next section reconstructs the main theoretical debates underpinning research on DLPs. The third section summarizes key issues in the extensive and consolidated debate on informal work and the informal economy. In the fourth section, we describe the framework for analysing the reconfiguration of work resulting from the introduction of DLPs. The final section introduces the articles included in the special issue.

### **Critical appraisal of theoretical contributions on the in-formalizing effects of DLPs on work**

Delving into the literature on the effects of DLPs on work, *uberization* is one of the most common concepts employed since the mid-2010s to indicate broad transformations involving both labour processes and labour relations that extend beyond DLPs. This includes on-demand services, the elimination of traditional intermediaries, gig-based labour, dynamic pricing models and customer rating and review systems.

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Building on the notion of *uberization*, [Abílio \(2023\)](#) identifies informalization processes as a core element of this concept, concerning different aspects of work and employment. Informalization processes reshape employment conditions by rendering workers part of an informal workforce. This implies a lack of job security, limited or no access to rights and protections (e.g., health care or social security), declining and unstable income levels, increasing workloads and working hours, loss of autonomy and control over work, as well as heightened exposure to exploitation. Informalization also entails the erosion of fixed, regulated and stable forms of the labour process, including standard working hours (e.g., the 9-to-5 schedule), contracts, workplace locations (e.g., factories, offices), managerial control and supervision, division of labour and career progression pathways. Moreover, informalization blurs the distinction between what is and is not considered working time, what is and is not recognized as a workplace, and, more generally, what is and is not socially recognized as “work” ([Surie and Huws, 2023](#); [De Vita and Bertolini, 2025](#)). For instance: Is platform labour without a contract work? Is content creation on social media work if it does not yet generate income? Is waiting for an Uber request work? In this respect, many contributions highlight that informalization disqualifies skills; for instance, traditional taxi drivers are considered professional workers, whereas Uber drivers are framed as amateur workers without specific skills.

Although the analytical framework of informalization processes has gradually been adopted by academics in the Global North, [Surie and Huws \(2023\)](#) and [Pirone \(2024\)](#) note that early research in Western economies preferred the terms *precarization* or *casualization* of work to describe similar processes and effects on workers’ rights in the context of DLPs ([Filipetto et al., 2024](#); [Rodriguez-Modroño et al., 2024](#); [Murgia, 2025](#); [Pulignano and Domecka, 2025](#); [Arcidiacono et al., 2019](#)). The central idea is that DLPs perpetuate and intensify broader trends of increasing precarity and non-standardization of work under platformization ([Woodcock and Graham, 2020](#)). *Precarization* and *casualization* highlight the exploitation of workers and the production of hyper-precarious labour, as DLPs enable the avoidance of responsibilities for providing benefits and job security and facilitate the evasion of industry regulation ([Scholz, 2016](#)). This has contributed to the decline of formerly full-time, year-round employment under a single employer, replaced by part-time, temporary and other non-standard forms of work ([Cherry and Aloisi, 2016](#)). The key concern is that the flexibility and income opportunities of gig work come at the expense of social security, effectively equating precarious employment with informal work.

Within the *precarization* or *casualization* perspective, labour process theory has often been used to analyse work transformations. [Gandini \(2019, p. 1045\)](#) highlights the value of this framework, which reveals how platforms transform social relations into relations of production, establishing non-standard employment relations between a “hirer” and a “worker” on a self-employment basis. Within this scenario, rather than serving as neutral intermediaries, DLPs make employment conditions more precarious through algorithmic control: transmitting client orders to workers, determining the tasks to be executed, setting compensation for tasks and evaluating workers’ performance ([Gerold et al., 2025](#)).

Another key concept used to analyse such ambiguous informalization processes is *selective formalization*, proposed by [Van Doorn \(2020\)](#). This term refers to the way DLPs “engage in a set of business practices that formalize some aspects of the gig while perpetuating, and sometimes aggravating, certain conditions of informality that have long characterized domestic labour” ([Van Doorn, 2020, pp. 51–52](#)). Examples include the implementation of digital payment systems, standardized performance metrics and work documentation tools. However, “these practices structurally benefit the platform and its clients, while disempowering workers, who are expected to carry all the administrative, fiscal and legal burdens of a formal labour relation but receive few of its benefits” ([Van Doorn, 2020, pp. 51–52](#)). Tax information is not provided to workers, nor do DLPs enforce the payment of social contributions. DLPs do not assist workers with tax compliance. Thus, rather than formalizing employment relationships, these technologies institutionalize only certain aspects of

recruitment and work arrangements of a previously invisible informal workforce, thereby exacerbating inequalities (Andersen *et al.*, 2024; Della Puppa *et al.*, 2025; Katta *et al.*, 2024; Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2022; Keşâne and Spuriņa, 2026; Orth, 2024; Tandon and Rathi, 2024; Diakonidze, 2023).

Moreover, highlighting the limitations of the *uberization* and *casualization* frames and pointing to a gendered bias in the literature, Ticona and Mateescu (2018) emphasize how DLPs blur the boundaries between formal and informal employment. According to the authors, by exploiting ambiguous and weak regulations in sectors traditionally characterized by informality (De Vita and Bertolini, 2025; Gerold *et al.*, 2025), DLPs use technical and legal mechanisms to exploit a racialized, low-wage workforce in feminized sectors (Andersen *et al.*, 2024; Della Puppa *et al.*, 2025; Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2024).

Another strand of research – in this case, mainly focused on the domestic sector – draws on Marxist and feminist political economy, highlighting the relevance of subsumption and the commodification of care and social reproduction. Shifting the focus from technology to capital, this approach interprets the transition from informal to formal relations as the transformation of own-account informal workers into wage workers in capital–labour relations (Joyce, 2020). In this context, venture capital reorganizes existing labour processes under its own domination, introducing the cash nexus: a direct, purely economic relationship between workers and employers based solely on monetary exchange. In this way, DLPs absorb pre-existing informal and reproductive labour into capital–labour relations, thereby intensifying commodification and widening inequalities.

Transformations induced by DLPs in the domestic and other sectors have also been analysed through more traditional theories of informality in urban contexts. Here, informalization is understood as a broader trend in contemporary capitalism, shifting from state-driven macro-level deregulation to meso-level loosening of business practice standards. Different types of informal work represent a specific type of labour market deregulation, privatization and flexibility tied to economic restructuring. Coupled with technological change, these practices generate socio-economic pressures that push business activities, labour and capital resources outside formal regulation. Some scholars focus on informal ecologies that intersect with the formal interface of platform economies, such as subletting markets (Mendonça *et al.*, 2023; Zhao, 2019). In ride-hailing and food-delivery, fake accounts, rented driver profiles, GPS-spoofing plug-ins and other “pirate” software circulate through social media and grey-app stores, allowing workers to meet productivity targets and survive competition. These clandestine informal markets exemplify the “informal circuits” that, as Zhao (2019) argues, sustain platform capitalism by accommodating local constraints while offering a globalized service. In her framework, formal circuits are defined by the top-down domination of capital, while informal circuits rely on socially embedded practices. Hence, platforms not only absorb segments of informality but actively generate new forms of it, underscoring both the constitutive power of DLPs and the adaptive capacity of informal economic practices (Borghi and Peterlongo, 2023).

A final research strand engages more directly with traditional debates on the informal economy, though reaching different conclusions regarding informalization. On one side, some studies draw on theories linking macro-social structures to participation in informal economies, highlighting how policymakers and state agencies attempt to promote formalization (Weber *et al.*, 2021). On the other side, studies of DLPs shift the focus to the individual and organizational level, emphasizing workers’ rational calculations when weighing the costs and benefits of informal working arrangements, as well as their uncertainty or distrust toward formal institutions (Williams, 2014). In this strand, scholars show that DLPs often facilitate partial and selective transitions from informal to formal arrangements – for example, through the standardization of pricing, punctuality and service quality, compared to the more ad hoc practices of informal own-account workers. In some cases, platforms attempt to “educate” workers about the benefits of formalization (Weber *et al.*, 2021), though few examples show transitions into formal contractual relations. In addition,

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other studies examine engagement in the informal economy as a coping practice and/or explore informal workers' perceptions of their engagement within DLPs (Hunt and Summan, 2020). On the demand side, Romanian surveys reveal that many consumers deliberately purchase undeclared household and hospitality services through platforms when they perceive enforcement as weak (Horodnic *et al.*, 2023), a pattern also found in wider European data (Mațcu *et al.*, 2023).

Regardless of the theoretical frameworks employed, research on DLPs consistently delves into a type of informality that recalls debates on bogus self-employment. Although rarely connecting explicitly to this literature, studies have elaborated different concepts to analyse labour transformations, such as independent contractor misclassification (Ravenelle, 2019), subordinated self-management and individualized risk. These dynamics indicate a shift of responsibilities from businesses and governments onto workers, thereby feeding unpaid labour (Pulignano and Domecka, 2025). Platform workers are now expected to shoulder the costs of social reproduction (e.g., childcare, healthcare, elder care, education, time management, food preparation) individually, informally and often under conditions of precarity (Abílio, 2023). In this context, work becomes indecent and workers are reduced to mere labour power and made entirely responsible for their survival.

Regarding workers' capacity to resist DLPs, research shows that gig workers have, in some cases, succeeded in engaging in collective action in response to opaque managerial techniques, information asymmetries between platforms and workers and algorithmic control (Della Porta *et al.*, 2022; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). Although recent studies suggest that trade unions are attempting to organize these workers, such forms of resistance often fall outside the scope of conventional collective bargaining and traditional unionization patterns. Evidence shows that these forms of resistance often take shape informally and depend on mutual aid practices, which are widespread across workers' movements globally – especially in emerging economies where large segments of the labour force lack formal recognition and access to regulated systems of industrial relations (Marrone and Finotto, 2019). Overall, because gig workers do not constitute a homogeneous group, their capacity for mobilization varies considerably and depends on individual and group characteristics such as citizenship status, language proficiency and work permit conditions (Mendonça and Kougiannou, 2024). The spatial dispersion inherent in gig work further promotes individualization and isolation, hindering collective action. Language and cultural barriers, limited access to reliable information and fear of employer retaliation additionally constrain workers' ability to organize or seek support.

Overall, despite the fact that the analysis of processes of formalization and informalization of work has been at the centre of studies on DLPs, references to literature that has traditionally dealt with informal work and economies over the last 60 years remain limited and are concentrated in contributions from countries in the global South. Even within this body of literature, there has been little or no theoretical advancement (or contestation) in that direction. Before moving to the proposed analytical framework, the next section points out the main aspects that emerged from the more consolidated debate on informal work and the informal economy.

### **Debate on the informal work and economy: the consolidated knowledge**

The debate on the informal work and the informal economy spans multiple scientific disciplines and has produced rich but fragmented descriptions and often controversial interpretations. For this reason, in this section, we will outline only a few aspects that emerged from the more consolidated literature and that, in our view, are useful for providing a foundation for better understanding the current debate and studies addressing the relationship between informal work and DLPs. For convenience, these aspects are grouped into three macro themes: definitions, interpretative frameworks and intervention tools. A fourth macro-theme that relates to the development of both indirect and direct methods for measuring

informality is not yet relevant or easily applicable to the study of the effects of DLPs on work and, for this reason, is not addressed in this article.

### *Defining informal work*

The most common definitions of informal economy and work tend to emphasize that the boundaries of informal economic activities and occupations in a country depend primarily on how formal institutions define the formal part of the economy and employment. In fact, having formal (or regular) employment or activity mainly means being rooted, structured and protected by the formal institutional environment of a larger social entity such as a nation-state, while informal economic activities and jobs are not declared to the state for tax, social security and labour law purposes when they should be declared (Castells and Portes, 1989; Godfrey, 2015). Accordingly, informal or undeclared employment is defined as a set of working arrangements that, in practice or by law, are not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation or the right to social protection or other employment guarantees (ILO, 2002, 2018). More recent definitions of informal work and economy approach the informal economy as “socially legitimate paid work that is not declared to, hidden from, or unregistered with, the authorities for tax, social security and/or labour law purposes when it should be declared” (Williams, 2019, p. 111). Chen and Carré (2020) re-propose the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition that distinguishes between informal sector, “that refers to the production and employment that takes place in unincorporated or unregistered enterprises” and informal employment, “that refers to employment without social protection through work-both inside and outside the informal sector” (p. 4).

### *Interpretative approaches*

Early approaches to informal work were framed through three main interpretative models: the dualist, structuralist and legalist approaches. These frameworks, often associated with development theories, conceptualized informality either as a remnant of pre-modern economic systems (dualism), a functional by-product of capitalist restructuring (structuralism) or a response to excessive and ineffective state regulation (legalism). While historically significant, these dichotomous and often ideologically rooted interpretations have proved insufficient to capture the changing nature of informal work (Chen and Carré, 2020; Coletto, 2019). Emphasizing the need to move beyond static categories such as formal and informal, recent studies have proposed focusing on the different nature and forms of informality to better understand how it functions and how it intersects with the formal economy. Attention has therefore been given to processes in which the formal and informal intersect repeatedly (Chen and Carré, 2020; Coletto and Bisschop, 2017; Ianole-Călin *et al.*, 2026; Polese *et al.*, 2014; Polese, 2023); these developments have also promoted the study of informal or undeclared work in relation to broader labour market transformations, such as hybridization processes and the creation of forms of formalization of informality and informalization of formality (Borghini and Peterlongo, 2023; Murgia, 2025).

### *Policy intervention*

Historically, public institutions have approached the issues of the informal work in a fragmented and “siloeed” manner, involving different authorities (labour inspectorates, tax agencies and social security bodies) with limited coordination. More recently, both international and European-level actors have advocated for integrated, multidimensional strategies. These include a combination of direct measures (incentives and sanctions) and indirect measures (trust-building, awareness-raising and regulatory reforms) aimed at transforming undeclared work into regular and decent employment (Kogler *et al.*, 2015; Muehlbacher *et al.*, 2011). The “holistic approach” promoted by the European Labour Authority (ELA) and the integrated approach advanced by Women in Informal employment

### New analytical model to investigate the relationships between DLPs and (in)formal work: presentation and discussion

The analytical framework to study labour transformations in the platform economy through the debate on the informal work we propose is guided by four core conditions (included in the external circle of Figure 1) and entails three dimensions of analysis (included in the internal circle of Figure 1).

The conditions focus on key issues that, in our view, should be central to contemporary discussions of informal work. The dimensions, in turn, indicate different levels of analysis. For each level, we draw on insights from the most recent literature on informal work with the aim of facilitating an understanding of labour transformations that seek to bridge formal and informal work.

#### Condition 1: moving beyond the binary distinction between formal and informal employment

Following the most recent debates on informality, this condition highlights the need to move beyond the binary distinction between formal and informal employment by engaging with discussions on the hybridization of work. Indeed, employment through DLPs is often characterized by the simultaneous formal and informal elements and the formalization of employment status does not necessarily guarantee decent work. Departing from traditional binary frameworks often employed in labour studies (such as employment versus self-employment, standard versus non-standard work or formal versus informal employment), the hybridization approach provides a lens to examine the highly fragmented nature of

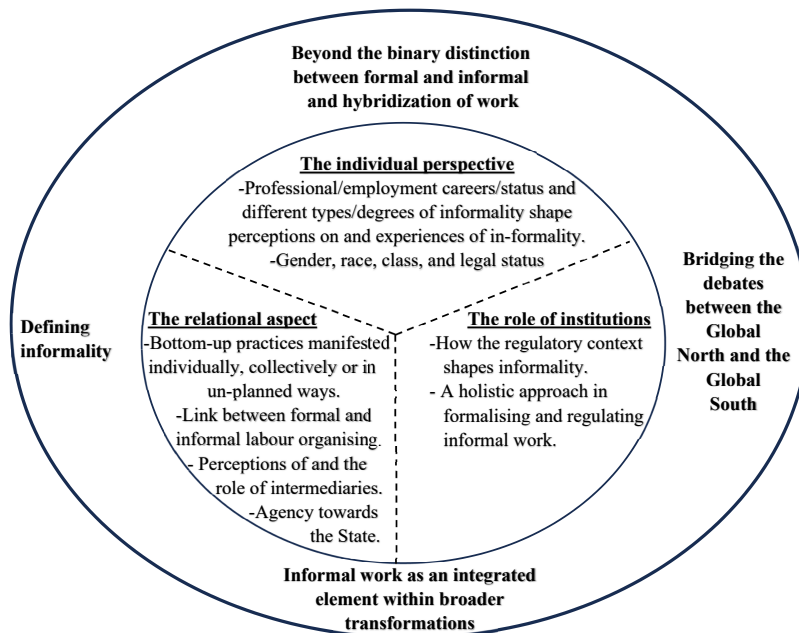


Figure 1. Analytical framework

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contemporary labour (Murgia, 2025). These processes influence working conditions, access to social rights and representation, as well as workers' subjective perceptions and expressions of agency.

*Condition 2: discussing definitions of informality*

This second condition places the issue of definitions and meanings of informality back at the centre of the analysis. The literature on informal work and the informal economy has shown that precise definitions of informal workers differ across countries; however, there is a broad consensus that informal work is typically unprotected and unregulated by the legal frameworks that safeguard formally employed workers (Agarwala and Tilly, 2025; Chen and Carré, 2020), often indicating lack of formal employment contracts and work in the extra-legal, hidden spaces, unlicensed factory units and public spaces (Castells and Portes, 1989). At the same time, literature highlights that informality should not be conflated with precarity or casualization, though these may be features of undeclared employment. New challenges and difficulties are therefore emerging in defining clear conceptual boundaries, which stem, at least in part, from the increasing levels of heterogeneity and diversification that have characterized multiple manifestations of the phenomenon in recent years. In fact, many recent studies on informal work insist on the high degree of heterogeneity and adaptability that characterize today's informal work (Williams, 2017; Dimitriadis, 2023a, b). Adaptability manifests in the ability of informal arrangements to respond to changes in economic structures and institutional environments at the supranational, national and local levels.

*Condition 3: Situating informal work within broader transformations of work*

Even the most advanced conceptualizations of informal work often continue to treat it as "other" in relation to standard employment. Despite attempts to move beyond binary thinking, much of the literature still frames undeclared or informal work either as a remnant of previous economic regimes or as a by-product of ongoing labour market transformations. As a consequence, informal work remains analytically detached from the core of labour market analysis, frequently appearing as an anomaly rather than as an integral component of broader transformations of work. There is, therefore, an increasing need for analytical models capable of addressing configurations that resemble a puzzle composed of multiple interrelated pieces. From a methodological perspective, this implies developing and testing analytical frameworks that are sufficiently flexible, yet at the same time sufficiently clear, to foster connections among these different elements.

*Condition 4: bridging the debate between the global North and the global South*

The fourth condition of our analytical framework points to the necessity of bringing together research from both the global North and the global South to advance theoretical and methodological insights (Recchi, 2021). While acknowledging the contextual specificities of regional, national and local levels, DLPs operate under similar logics and technological means, disrupting standard labour and commodifying informal labour (Pirone, 2024).

Departing from these four core conditions, the proposed framework is designed to interpret processes of change by taking into account three levels of analysis: micro, meso and macro. Rather than suggesting exclusively analyses that necessarily integrate all three levels or dimensions simultaneously, we propose an analytical framework that allows for the development of analyses focused on a single level while systematically acknowledging that relevant factors operating at the other two levels of analysis may influence the primary level of analysis (and vice versa). In the following lines, for each level of analysis, we provide guidance drawn from studies on informal work and the informal economy, with the aim of facilitating dialogue between studies dealing with the relationship between regular work and DLPs and the broader literature on informal work.

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### *Individual level*

The first level of analysis (micro) focuses on the individual perspective. This level enables the investigation of aspects characterizing work in its everyday practices and of how these are shaped by the introduction of DLPs. Attention should be paid to workers' prior (or parallel) employment histories and to how the coexistence of formal and informal segments of work is perceived and experienced by workers themselves. Informal work may, in some cases, be regarded as preferable to formal employment, either because of poor working conditions in the formal sector or because of subjective evaluations related to autonomy and flexibility. This perspective also allows for an analysis of changes in individuals' employment and professional status, paying equal attention to regular and undeclared work segments. The analytical focus here lies in reconstructing employment trajectories – whether linear or marked by strong segmentation – in which transitions between formal and informal work are often non-linear and reversible. For instance, in the context of gig work, full-time cleaners may view informal work as a means of supplementing income while benefiting from the flexibility offered by DLPs. Similarly, formally registered own-account workers may use DLPs as a way to expand their client base (Dimitriadis and Coletto, 2024).

An emphasis on employment careers also opens a second line of inquiry, namely the differentiation of forms of undeclared work. Recent literature has highlighted the growing need to disaggregate different types of undeclared work in order to develop a more fine-grained understanding of how the informal economy operates and adapts to contemporary economic changes. Studies focusing on varying degrees of informality and on distinct types of informal work (Williams, 2014; Dimitriadis, 2023c) provide insights into their implications not only for wages and working conditions, but also for individual and collective claims and for the social representations of work. This dimension is also particularly relevant for analysing own-account work and the issue of worker misclassification, whereby individuals are formally classified as self-employed while effectively operating within subordinate employment relationships.

Finally, this micro-level analysis can be further enriched by integrating intersecting dimensions such as gender, race, class and legal status. For example, studies by WIEGO have shown that women are overrepresented in informal employment categories associated with higher risks of poverty, such as homeworkers and unpaid family workers. At the same time, a substantial body of literature has documented the relationship between the lack of legal recognition of migrant workers and their concentration in informal employment (Boels, 2014).

### *Relational aspect*

The second level of analysis (meso) focuses on the relational aspects linking the various actors involved, directly or indirectly, in platform-mediated work. A first theme within this level concerns forms of worker aggregation and representation. The literature on informal work has largely focused on new forms of grassroots organization which, depending on the context, have taken diverse shapes. Scholars have highlighted bottom-up processes rooted in subsistence strategies, resistance and subaltern modes of existence, which may manifest individually, collectively or in unplanned ways (Lindell, 2010; Coletto and Bisschop, 2017; Coletto and Carbonai, 2023; Crossa, 2016; McFarlane, 2012). In the global South, particular attention has been paid to forms of association that have consolidated over time and have succeeded in securing protections and guarantees for informal workers, while also building networks of dialogue and solidarity that operate beyond the local level. These experiences have often emerged within specific sectors, such as domestic work, urban waste collection and management and street trading (Agarwala *et al.*, 2025; Fish, 2017; Rosaldo, 2016). Other studies have examined the relationship between these new forms of representation and more traditional trade union organizations rooted in predominantly Fordist economic systems (Agarwala and Tilly, 2025; Eaton *et al.*, 2017; Rosaldo, 2021). This literature points to a dynamic of encounter and tension that offers important insights into the challenges posed by

the introduction of DLPs to organized forms of worker representation. At the same time, it may be analytically fruitful to place contributions from the global South in dialogue with studies from the North, which have focused on the representation of precarious and migrant workers in sectors such as domestic work, cleaning, construction, meat processing and others (Alberti *et al.*, 2018; Jiang and Korczynskim, 2016; Tapia and Alberti, 2019). In this direction, research on collective forms of agency and resistance among platform workers – such as the creation of support networks that have emerged in recent years to exchange information, report and warn about abuses or enact practices of mutual support (Barrial Berbén *et al.*, 2026) – can benefit from engagement with earlier studies on the organization of informal workers. Establishing such a dialogue with the literature on informal work may also help to address questions concerning the conditions under which collective organization succeeds or fails (Niebler and Animento, 2023).

A second theme within this meso-level dimension concerns relationships between workers and employers. In the context of informal work, this often involves analysing forms of labour intermediation that organize work across sectors such as agriculture, home delivery, personal services and care work. This body of research examines how labour relations are structured through informal intermediaries, frequently by comparing triadic relationships among intermediaries, clients and workers with more conventional employment arrangements. For instance, intermediaries operating in agriculture or construction – who may retain a share of workers' daily wages – are not always perceived as exploitative or criminal actors, but rather as indispensable figures who facilitate access to employment and help migrant workers avoid social isolation, particularly in contexts characterized by limited language skills or weak social networks (Perrotta, 2014; Piro, 2021). From this perspective, it would be particularly relevant to explore how gig workers perceive DLPs as intermediaries, especially in sectors in which informal intermediaries have traditionally played a significant role, such as agriculture and construction and into which DLPs have begun to insert (Korbi, 2024; Maçtu *et al.*, 2023). A related but distinct strand of research focuses on direct relationships between informal workers and employers, highlighting how participation in undeclared work can, in some cases, generate mutually beneficial arrangements and be interpreted as an expression of migrants' agency vis-à-vis the state (Dimitriadis, 2023a).

### *Role of institutions*

The third level of analysis (macro) concerns the role of institutions and is crucial for understanding regulatory scenarios and the reciprocal influence between institutional contexts and social phenomena. This level allows for a more systematic examination of how regulatory environments – both in their presence and absence – shape the manifestation of informality within platform-mediated work.

A first strand of research has focused on the relationship between the size of the informal economy and institutional configurations, including taxation systems, regulatory burdens, corruption, governance quality and law enforcement, as well as on how informality responds to economic cycles (Devine, 2021). Another line of inquiry has examined the relationship between informality and institutions in democratic contexts (Elgin and Oztunali, 2014; Elbahnasawy *et al.*, 2016; Teobaldelli and Schneider, 2013). Drawing on the analytical framework of institutions developed by Acemoglu *et al.* (2005), some studies have analysed how the extractiveness of institutions correlates with the size of the informal economy, showing that higher levels of informality tend to be associated with lower trust in formal institutions (Schneider and Enste, 2000; Coletto *et al.*, 2018). At the European level, neo-institutionalist approaches have recently been revitalized to explain the scope and nature of informal economic activity. For example, Williams *et al.* (2015) distinguish between *complementary relationships*, where informal institutions reinforce formal ones and *substitutive relationships*, where a significant gap exists between the two. They argue that the greater the asymmetry between formal and informal institutions and thus the wider the gap

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between state norms and individual moralities, the higher the propensity to engage in informal economic practices. In this regard, it would be interesting to understand how workers' informal practices and perceptions of engagement in DLPs relate to their trust or not in formal and informal institutions.

These institutional analyses intersect with a broader body of research dedicated to the design and evaluation of measures aimed at formalizing or regularizing informal work. Historically, undeclared work has often been addressed through fragmented, "silo-based" policy approaches involving (1) labour inspectorates (dealing with irregular conduct concerning working conditions and/or health and safety legislation), (2) social security institutions (monitoring and sanctioning social security fraud) and (3) tax authorities (dealing with tax evasion) (Horodnic and Williams, 2022). Numerous studies have shown that such approaches tend to be poorly coordinated and limited in effectiveness. As a result, recent debates have shifted away from identifying isolated policy instruments towards exploring how different measures can be combined to facilitate transitions from undeclared to regular and decent work. In this context, the literature increasingly emphasizes multidimensional strategies that integrate direct measures aimed at increasing the benefits of operating formally and indirect measures, which seek to strengthen institutional trust and culture (Chen, 2016; Horodnic and Williams, 2022; Torgler, 2003). These contributions are particularly relevant for interpreting processes of "formalisation of informality" and "informalisation of formality" and for identifying potential points of convergence with emerging institutional approaches to DLPs. Such convergence is especially challenging in light of the considerable capacity of DLPs to adapt to national regulatory contexts and to reproduce informal working practices within ostensibly formalized arrangements (Koutsimpogiorgos *et al.*, 2023).

Overall, the proposed analytical framework not only provides deeper insights into the relationship between DLPs and informal work but also offers a useful tool for analysing contemporary transformations of work more broadly. By systematically bringing together regular and informal or undeclared work, the framework helps to reduce the risk of treating informality as something external or residual in relation to standard employment. In this sense, adopting the proposed framework in future research on the effects of DLPs on work has the potential to significantly advance – and, where necessary, contest – theoretical debates on informal work and the informal economy, which have thus far shown limited development in relation to platform-mediated labour.

The development of this framework was strongly shaped by the process of selecting and refining the contributions included in the special issue "The informal economy and digital labour platforms: Opportunities, risks and challenges for workers". As discussed in the final section of this article, these contributions – drawing on diverse approaches and perspectives – address key and recent transformations of (informal) work associated with the expansion of DLPs. Collectively, they highlight the heterogeneity and non-linearity of ongoing changes, further enriching the "puzzle" that characterizes the contemporary world of work and underscoring the need for analytical frameworks that are both conceptually clear and empirically sensitive. In this sense, we hope that the contributions to the special issue will stimulate further debate on the proposed framework and encourage its refinement through future empirical research.

### **Informal economy and digital labour platforms: opportunities, risks and challenges for workers. Introduction to the special issue**

The contributions collected in this special issue provide empirically grounded analyses of transformations in (informal) work associated with the expansion of DLPs, drawing on evidence from both the global North and the global South. They focus primarily on sectors that have been particularly affected by the diffusion of platform-mediated labour, including domestic work, delivery services, sex work, cleaning, wedding-related services and the garment sector. Employing a wide range of methodological approaches and interpretative

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perspectives, the articles offer complementary insights into how DLPs reshape working conditions, labour relations and regulatory environments.

Specifically, several contributions focus on working conditions, worker agency, economic insecurity and forms of workers' voice at the micro level. Other articles address meso-level dynamics, such as processes of work reorganization and changing inter-firm and client-worker relations. Finally, some contributions adopt a macro-level perspective, examining regulatory frameworks and formalization processes.

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By combining micro- and macro-level analyses, Sanz de Miguel and colleagues examine how the interaction between labour and migration regimes in Spain channels migrants with precarious or irregular legal status into non-standard and often undeclared forms of labour within delivery platforms. Also focusing on the Spanish context, Santamarina and Fernández-Trujillo Moraes extend the analysis beyond food delivery to include domestic work, showing how the devaluation and racialization of informal migrant labour contribute to the expansion of platform-based service provision.

Adopting a perspective that incorporates both workers' and employers' (or clients') viewpoints, Pignolo analyses platform-mediated domestic work and argues that the forms of (in)visibility produced by platforms enhance clients' agency. In particular, the author identifies a "catalogue effect" whereby platforms enable employers to access a wide range of worker profiles within a single, organized space, facilitating the selection of services and the definition of working arrangements.

Shifting the focus to the global South, Ooza investigates the work of content creators contributing to the OnlyFans platform in the South African context. The article highlights the tension faced by these workers in managing the risks associated with hypervisibility and algorithmic management, while simultaneously navigating opportunities linked to flexibility and autonomy. In the Indian context, Roy examines transformations in wedding-related services, showing how digital platforms reconfigure historically embedded practices of trust, personalized negotiation and network-based collaboration by overlaying them with new demands for visibility, aesthetic standardization and continuous engagement.

Focusing on South Korea, Lee and Kim adopt a combined micro- and macro-level approach to analyse occupational safety and health risks faced by (informal) delivery workers. Their study reveals a process of systematic risk externalization enabled by platform-mediated hybrid forms of informality, which expose workers to multiple, interrelated vulnerabilities. Remaining within the delivery sector but shifting to Mexico City, Malcon Gómezrey examines autonomy and flexibility in platform work, linking these dimensions to the definition and transformation of workplaces in the urban context. At the meso level, Ai analyses relationships between firms by examining how the Shein platform tolerates and actively incorporates informal labour practices into production strategies aimed at reducing costs and increasing flexibility within global supply chains.

The effects of DLPs on domestic labour are further explored through macro-level analytical frameworks in two comparative contributions. Celebi and Kemmerling analyse the impact of DLPs on domestic work across different European contexts, finding that lower reliance on market mechanisms within more regulated environments is associated with reduced risks for workers, while marketplace-dominated models operating in less regulated settings intensify experiences of informality. Similarly, Giuliani and Paraciani – in a comparative study of domestic-sector DLPs across five European cities – demonstrate that national institutional contexts play a crucial role in shaping the gendered and ethnic composition of workers engaged in online cleaning platforms.

Finally, the special issue includes contributions that focus explicitly on regulatory frameworks and policy interventions aimed at increasing the transparency of labour relations and expanding worker protections in platform-mediated contexts. Koniordos examines the recent European Directive on platform work, highlighting both its objectives and the challenges associated with its implementation. Archibugi and Tosoni address potential regulatory mechanisms for evaluating user feedback on DLPs, discussing their implications

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for data protection and workers' rights. Focusing on the Indian context, Katrak and Yusufli analyse labour law reforms and show how the regulatory framework tends to facilitate the growth of DLPs while paying insufficient attention to processes of formalization and protection for informal workers.

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