



I-CLAIM

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

Living and working conditions of migrants in the delivery sector in Poland

Sector report

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Executive Summary

The report presents the results of the qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of migrant workers in the delivery sector in Poland. Our study included desk research, ethnographic observation, as well as in-depth interviews with 9 stakeholders and 24 migrant delivery couriers, conducted in collaboration with community researchers between August 2024 and May 2025.

Uncovered irregularities related to the delivery sector, mainly concerning residence status and work arrangements. They were shaped by two interlinked factors: the unregulated nature of the platform sector, with the central role of fleet partners (firms that intermediate between delivery platforms and couriers) and Poland's increasingly restrictive migration regime. Companies and intermediaries exploit existing loopholes to increase their profits at the cost of workers' rights, while the government tightens migration control. These intertwined aspects produce systemic precarity, making it nearly impossible for migrant couriers to secure stable legal status.

The experiences of irregularity varied depending on factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, migration status, and socioeconomic background. Our participants were mainly students or recent graduates, whose status provided them with access to legal work, allowing them to combine delivery with other jobs. Other interviewees were seeking international protection in Poland, and work in delivery constituted their primary source of income. For some, platform work offered flexibility and an accessible source of economic resources, while for others, it aggravated legal and financial vulnerability.

A key issue represented the instability of legal status and challenges in securing residence permits, aggravated by the malpractice of intermediaries and the specific nature of delivery work, usually not providing a sufficient ground for residence permit due to the character of employment in the sector (mainly based on mandate and rental contracts or informal), with limited or no access to social protection. Couriers lack information about their rights, the types of contracts, and insurance options. They faced different health and safety risks. With little platform or intermediary support in the case of accidents or illnesses, our study participants relied on student insurance (if applicable), coverage secured through other types of employment (if relevant), or private insurance, which proved ineffective in practice.

Examples of racial, ethnic and linguistic discrimination were reported by clients, passers-by and public authorities (mainly city guards). Access to institutional support was minimal; the participants predominantly relied on informal networks or commercial organisations. The interviewees mistrusted and avoided contacting public institutions in cases of rights violations.

Our study sheds light on the understudied topic of the structural production of precarity, exploitation, and risks in platform food delivery in Poland. It contributes to the intense current debate regarding platform regulation, migrant work and migration policy, offering a critical perspective on the interrelations between legal status, exploitation and institutional neglect in the delivery sector.

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1. Introduction

This report presents our research into the living and working conditions of migrants with irregularised or other precarious migration and/or work statuses in Poland. Our study focuses on the case of migrants working in the food delivery sector in Warsaw (see the methodology section).

Previous studies in Poland explore the precariousness of platform work and focus on factors that condition and contribute to the migrant labour market vulnerabilities (Polkowska & Filipek, 2020; Jancewicz & Józwiak, 2025; Kowalik et al., 2025). Our contribution deepens our knowledge of irregularities related to the delivery sector in Poland. First of all, we explore the legalisation of stay and the stability of legal statuses in the context of the delivery sector. Secondly, we focus on the complexity of the irregularities of work and its impact on the daily life of couriers and their households. The important dimension of the analyses was asymmetries of power relations encompassing malpractices of fleet partners, clients, social passersby (e.g. pedestrians) and contacts with public authorities (e.g. the police, City Guard). Thirdly, we examine how being a migrant and a courier intertwine with gender, age, race, nationality (ethnicity), migration and family statuses, which might exacerbate stay and labour market vulnerabilities. Fourthly, while we analyse how irregularity is produced and reinforced, our research also sheds light on the agency of delivery workers with migration experience in dealing with complex constraints.

The report is structured as follows. The first section briefly overviews migration-related context in Poland, outlining key policy changes and recent migration trends. It also presents an analysis of the platform economy in Poland based on secondary data and literature review. The following section describes the methodology used in the study and highlights key methodological challenges. The third section presents the main findings from ethnographic research. The final section of the report offers concluding remarks.

2. Context

The growing immigration and politicisation of migration in Poland observable from the mid-2010s constitutes a crucial context for policy developments regarding irregular migration and the living and working conditions of migrants (Matuszczyk et al., 2024). While migrants from Ukraine remain the dominant group in Poland enjoying a privileged position, recent years have seen a growing presence of workers from Asian or, later also South American countries, who are more prone to the effects of irregularity.

A new migration strategy published in October 2024¹ outlines several priority goals that refer to the prevention of migration irregularities, such as border protection, changes in asylum policy, and measures to prevent the misuse of student visas, such as through fictitious enrolment in studies². This new turn in the political agenda toward the larger securitisation of migration pushed forward the implementation of control and restrictive measures, such as more checks on the legality of stay and deportation actions.³ In 2025,

¹ <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/odzyskac-kontrolę-zapewnić-bezpieczeństwo---strategia-migracyjna-na-lata-2025---2030>, [accessed 15.05.2025].

² Ibidem, p. 4.

³ Over 2500 controls of the legal stay were conducted within two days (13-14 February 2025) within the joint action of the Border Guard and the Police. More than 400 return procedures were initiated. Krajowa akcja Straży Granicznej przeciwko nielegalnej migracji cudzoziemców,

several important changes to the Polish legal system were introduced. First of all, there has been an essential shift towards more restricted access to asylum in Poland⁴ and eventually, the temporary and territorial suspension of access to the asylum procedure. On the basis of the act, the government passed a regulation that blocked access to asylum procedure at the Polish-Belarusian border⁵. That came into force in March 2025. Amendments regarding the employment of migrants in Poland were introduced in the Act on the Conditions for the Admissibility of Entrusting Work to Foreigners in the Territory of the Republic of Poland came into force on June 1, 2025⁶. The new regulation focused on formalising employment, introducing the requirement of a written contract, as well as its translation or a bilingual version. It also increased sanctions for violations of employment regulations and extended the control authorization of the Border Guard and the Labour Inspectorate.⁷ The new law introduced full digitalisation of the procedures for obtaining work permits and cancelled the obligation of conducting a local labour market test every time before a work permit is granted. However the access to the labour market has been restricted for holders of some types of short-term visas. The amendment to the Act on Foreigners also entered into force on June 1, 2025.⁸ Another change included further restrictions on granting visas, including national visas for students.⁹ The Act was signed in May by the Polish president and came into force at the same time as the previous two legislation acts. The legislator announced increased control in the verification of visa applications, as well as a requirement for knowledge of the language of the educational programme at a minimum B2 level. Additionally, the document mentioned the introduction of measures such as limits on the number of foreign students to no more than 50% of the total student population at a given university.

<https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/14078,Krajowa-akcja-Strazy-Granicznej-przeciwko-nielegalnej-migracji-cudzoziemcow.html>, [accessed 15.05.2025].

- ⁴ Prezydent podpisał nowelizację ustawy o udzielaniu cudzoziemcom ochrony na terytorium Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/ustawa-azylowa,99228>, [accessed 15.05.2025].
- ⁵ Rozporządzenie w sprawie czasowego ograniczenia prawa do złożenia wniosku o udzielenie ochrony międzynarodowej <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/rozporzadzenie-w-sprawie-czasowego-ograniczenia-prawa-do-zlozenia-wniosku-o-udzielenie-ochrony-miedzynarodowej>, [accessed 15.05.2025].
- ⁶ Ustawa z dnia 20 marca 2025 r. o warunkach dopuszczalności powierzania pracy cudzoziemcom na terytorium Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20250000621>, [accessed 15.05.2025].
- ⁷ Zmiany w zatrudnianiu cudzoziemców od 1 czerwca 2025 r., https://www.ey.com/pl_pl/insights/workforce/zatrudnianie-cudzoziemcow-zmiany-czerwiec-2025, [accessed 15.05.2025].
- ⁸ Ustawa z dnia 24 kwietnia 2025 r. o zmianie ustawy o cudzoziemcach oraz niektórych innych ustaw, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20250000619>, [accessed 15.05.2025].
- ⁹ Ustawa z dnia 4 kwietnia 2025 r. o zmianie niektórych ustaw w celu wyeliminowania nieprawidłowości w systemie wizowym Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20250000622>, [accessed 15.05.2025].

2.1. The platform-based economy in Poland and characteristic of the food delivery sector

The platform sector in Poland is largely fragmented and remains unregulated (Owczarek, 2022; Kobroń-Gąsiorowska, 2023; Muszyński et al., 2024). The important ongoing regulatory process from the perspective of labour relations concerns the implementation of EU Directive 2024/2831¹⁰ into national legislation. Main actors involved in this process are the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, trade unions and activist initiatives (e.g. a Union Pyszne.pl/Just Eat Takeaway under the umbrella of Confederation of Labour,¹¹ a syndicalist trade union, Workers' Initiative, couriers' activists initiative Zentrale, Union of Glovo riders¹²), the union of application partners (e.g. Polish Association of Application Partners, PZPA), representatives of platform companies. The most well-known international platforms operating in Poland include Uber, Uber Eats, Glovo, Bolt, Wolt, FreeNow, Pyszne.pl/Just Eat Takeaway, and Stuart, as well as the national company Żabka Jush.

The specificity of Polish context is characterised by the central role of so-called fleet or application partners who formalise agreements with couriers, handle the payments transferred by the platform to the courier, and take on some of the formal obligations required by local legislation (Polkowska, 2025). The only company that does not collaborate with fleet partners in Poland is Pyszne.pl/Just Eat Takeaway. Another type of intermediaries are vehicle rental companies. Couriers can also use their vehicles, including cars¹³ or even skateboards or rollerblades.¹⁴ Cooperation between couriers and intermediary partners is based primarily on civil law contracts (contracts of mandate), self-employment, or a combination of a contract of mandate with a vehicle rental agreement (e.g. scooter, bicycle, or car) (Kobroń-Gąsiorowska, 2023; PZPA, 2025; Muszyński et al., 2024). However, Kaczmarczyk and co-researchers (2022:8) note that "Most platform workers in Poland are neither self-employed nor employed in the sense of the labour code".

The Polish Union of Application Partners, which brings together the 12 largest fleet partners in Poland, estimates that these firms collaborate with over 40,000 platform workers (PZPA, 2025). Pyszne.pl/Just Eat Takeaway estimated the number of platform couriers around 2 thousand in 2023¹⁵. However, the number of application riders is likely higher, as there are also smaller fleet partners operating on the Polish market, and some individuals may work unregistered on platforms (e.g., using shared or borrowed accounts).

The delivery sector in Poland remains mainly male-dominated (Beręsewicz et al., 2021; PZPA, 2025), and workers' age varies between 18 and 40 years old (Owczarek, 2018a; Beręsewicz et al., 2021; Piasna et al., 2022; Polkowska, 2025). An important group of riders are young people under 26 years old, as they benefit from the additional zero-PIT relief, which means they are exempt from paying income tax.¹⁶ According to the legal

¹⁰ Directive (EU) 2024/2831 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2024 on improving working conditions in platform work, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/2831/oj/eng>, [accessed 12.0.2025]

¹¹ Confederation of Labour is a member of the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions, OPZZ. Konfederacja Pracy organises platform workers in Poland, <https://digitalplatformobservatory.org/initiative/konfederacja-pracy-organises-platform-workers-in-poland/>, [accessed 27.05.2025].

¹² Powstał związek zawodowy kurierów, <https://zentrale.pl/powstal-zwiazek-zawodowy-kurierow/>, [8.06.2025].

¹³ Czyli czym dostarczać jedzenie?, <https://dostawca-jedzenia.pl/dostawca-jedzenia-pojazd/>, [accessed 05.06.2025].

¹⁴ What kind of work for a student?, <https://city-drive.pl/en/blog/what-kind-of-work-for-a-student>, [accessed 08.06.2025].

¹⁵ Nadchodzą złote czasy dla kurierów? Współzałożyciel Pyszne.pl: chcemy zmienić postrzeganie tego zawodu, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/nadchodza-zlote-czasy-dla-kurierow-prezes-pysznepl-chcemy-zmienic-postrzeganie-tego>, [accessed 3.06.2025].

¹⁶ Zerowy PIT dla młodych, <https://www.podatki.gov.pl/media/6923/broszura-mf-zerowy-pit-dla-mlodych.pdf>, [accessed 8.06.2025].

situation at the time of the empirical research, regardless of age, foreign students enrolled in full-time studies (pl. studia stacjonarne) have access to the labour market. However, the right to work applies only as long as they maintain their student status. If a student loses this status, even if their visa remains valid, they are no longer entitled to work. Students enrolled in part-time studies (pl. studia zaoczne) are not granted access to the labour market.¹⁷ After the amendment to the Act came into force, only foreign students holding temporary residence permits based on studies have free access to the labour market for the duration of the permit's validity¹⁸.

Although platform work is highly individualised, trade unions and activist initiatives remain active in Poland. Pyszne.pl and Glovo riders' unions have organised protests and boycotts concerning payment policies (e.g. Pyszne.pl riders' strike in several cities¹⁹), the improvement of working conditions (e.g. Glovo riders' strike in Poznań),²⁰ and delays in payments (e.g. Glovo riders' strike in Gdańsk)²¹. The attention of institutions and public opinion regarding the rise of the grey area (Jancewicz & Józwiak, 2025) and precarious working conditions of migrants on platforms emerged in 2019 after the publication "*I Worked Illegally for Uber Eats*".²² Following the publication, the Polish Ombudsman requested that the Labour Inspectorate investigate the employment practices of couriers working with Uber Eats and assess their compliance with Polish labour law.²³ As a result of the inspection, the Chief Labour Inspector noted the limited ability to effectively investigate this sector and pointed out the mechanisms that can be used by companies to circumvent legal requirements for work permits for foreigners in Poland.

2.2. Migrant workers in the delivery sector

Figures representing the scale of migrants' involvement in the delivery sector in Poland remain unknown, both due to the lack of public data on this issue and the fragmented data on migrants' participation in the Polish labour market in general. It is worth mentioning that access to the labour market in Poland varies substantially. Some groups can work without an additional permit (e.g. family members of EU-member states citizens, permanent residence permit holders, long-term EU residence permit holders, international protection beneficiaries, spouses of Polish citizens, family re-union permit holders, holders of residence

¹⁷ Student (cudzoziemiec) a obowiązek posiadania zezwolenia na pracę,
<https://zielonalinia.gov.pl/-/student-cudzoziemiec-a-obowiazek-posiadania-zezwolenia-na-prace?> [accessed 05.06.2025].

¹⁸ After the entry into force of implementing provisions issued on the basis of the Act on the Conditions for the Admissibility of Employing Foreigners in the Territory of the Republic of Poland (Journal of Laws item 621).

¹⁹ Protest w Pyszne.pl: podjęto decyzję o kontynuacji nieformalnego strajku,
<https://www.opzz.org.pl/aktualnosci/kraj/2023/01/protest-w-pyszne-pl-podjeto-decyzje-o-kontynuacji-nieformalnego-strajku>, [accessed 09.06.2025].

²⁰ Kurierzy Glovo strajkują. "Patologia, z której wszyscy korzystamy",
<https://poznan.wyborcza.pl/poznan/7,36001,30819229,kurierzy-glovo-strajkuja-patologia-z-ktorej-wszyscy-korzystamy.html>, [accessed 09.06.2025].

²¹ O co chodzi z protestem w Glovo w Gdańsku?,
<https://zentrale.pl/o-co-chodzi-z-protestem-w-glovo-w-gdansk/>, [accessed 09.06.2025].

²² Piotr Szostak: Pracowałem na czarno w Uber Eats,
<https://wyborcza.pl/10,82983,24470891,piotr-szostak-pracowalem-na-czarno-w-uber-eats.html>, [accessed 14.05.2025].

²³ Co pozwala kurierom Ubera obchodzić obowiązek zezwolenia na pracę w Polsce,
<https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/pl/content/gip-do-rpo-co-pozwala-kurierom-ubera-obchodzic-obowiazek-zezwolenia-na-prace>, [accessed 14.05.2025].

permit for studies or research).²⁴ Ukrainian citizens and their spouses (even if they are third country nationals) in Poland also benefit from facilitated access to the labour market (based on a notification procedure). Another group includes migrants who can take advantage of a simplified work permit procedure (the so-called “declaration of entrusting work to a foreigner”), which applies to citizens of Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. The third category consists of migrants who are required to obtain a standard work permit. The majority of work permits in 2024 were issued to migrants from the Philippines (37,988), Colombia (37,987), India (33,928), Nepal (31,553), and Uzbekistan (26,073), with the Philippines, Colombia and Nepal emerging as new countries of origin for migrants in Poland.

Several studies indicate that migrants constitute a significant share of the workforce (Beręsewicz et al., 2021; Kowalik et al. 2023). For example, PZPA stated that 48% of 3,785 platform workers who participated in the survey were migrants representing 68 countries (PZPA, 2025). The largest group constituted Ukrainians (30%), followed by Belarusians, Georgians, Indians, and Uzbeks, as well as migrants from Turkey, Azerbaijan, Zimbabwe, Turkmenistan, and Pakistan (PZPA, 2025, p. 12).

The situation differs between migrants and native workers, as well as between recent and more settled migrants (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2022). Although delivery work is often perceived as a part-time job (Owczarek, 2018a; PZPA, 2025), migrants often treat it as their main source of income (Polkowska, 2025). On average, recent migrants tend to work more hours than others. Migrant platform workers work without any written work agreements (Jancewicz & Józwiak, 2025; Muszyński et al., 2024). Scholars show that migrants lacked an employment contract three times more often than Polish nationals (31.5% vs. 10.3%) and were also more likely to work under a rental contract (18% vs. 10%) (Jancewicz & Józwiak, 2025). It turned out that generally, migrants more often took up gig jobs for negative reasons as well as faced higher barriers to exit from the platform work “due to limited alternatives” (Ibidem, p. 115)

2.3. Delivery sector in Warsaw

Our fieldwork was conducted in Warsaw where beside the largest groups of Ukrainians and Belarusians from non-EU countries, new residents come from various destinations such as (other post-Soviet republics, India, Vietnam, Turkey, China, Latin American states.²⁵ It is worthwhile to mention the nexus of migration, the food delivery, and the usage of scooters and bicycles in Warsaw, where cycling and riding scooters are not so prevalent as in some other European countries (European Commission 2023). This makes migrant couriers particularly visible and vulnerable.

²⁴ When can an employer employ a foreign person without a work permit, https://migrant.info.pl/en/contracts_used_as_basis_for_performing_work, [accessed 27.05.2025]. In the 2023/2024 academic year, there were 107.1 thousand foreign students (GUS, 2024).

²⁵ Foreigners in Warsaw – statistical data, <https://europa-swiat.um.warszawa.pl/-/statystyki-cudzoziemcy>, [accessed 12.05.2025].

3. Methodology

The study was based on 29 individual interviews (24 standard ones and 5 follow-ups) with migrants currently working or having past experience (not earlier than three years before the study) in the delivery sector, as well as nine individual interviews with stakeholders (see Table 1 and 2 in Annex). The interviews were conducted between August 2024 and May 2025 and, with participants' consent, were recorded. Our research obtained ethical clearance from the Ethical Committee of the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw and was delivered following ethical guidelines, especially applying to vulnerable groups such as migrants in irregularised and/or other precarious conditions, including informed consent, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, and anonymisation. The participants were offered thank-you cards from a popular supermarket chain to compensate for their time.

The interviews with couriers were carried out by academics in collaboration with two community researchers: students with previous research experience, fluent in several relevant languages (Turkish, Uzbek, Russian and English). After training, their tasks included preparing study materials, assisting with recruitment, and conducting several interviews with students involved in delivery work. The recruitment took place through community researchers, ethnic networks, and organisations supporting migrants. Interviews were conducted in English, Polish, and Russian, either online (9) or in person (15), depending on participants' availability and preferences. Our semi-structured standard interviews were structured around statuses, sector experience, livelihood vulnerabilities and mobilisation. The follow-up interviews aimed to get insight using object-facilitated conversations.

All but one of our participants were males, which reflects the scarcity of female couriers. Most interviewees were between 20 and 30. Only one person was 19, and one was 43. Only three people out of 24 were married, of whom two had families in Poland and one in their home country. All participants had migration experience and came from non-EU countries: Eastern Europe (Ukraine & Belarus) (5), Western, Southern, and Central Asia (15) or various African states (4)²⁶. Only six interviewees were not working in the delivery sector at the time of interviews, but did so in the past. Study participants migrated to Poland for study or work. Two participants obtained international protection. At least 13 participants were awaiting the decision on legalisation procedures for temporary residence permits or international protection. None of the study participants reported being self-employed.

Apart from interviews with migrants, we also conducted nine interviews with various stakeholders: representatives of the platform, labour unions, insurance agencies, migrant support organisations, think tanks, and academia (see Table 3 in Appendix). These interviews were conducted primarily online (only two took place on-site).

Following transcription and translation,²⁷ the materials were manually anonymised and reviewed for accuracy prior to analysis. The traditional thematic analysis of the data was applied. For the preparation of this report, AI was only used for a basic language edition of the report.

²⁶ We do not include specific information on their countries of origin to protect the identity of our participants apart from the most numerous Eastern Europeans.

²⁷ An accepted transcription software "Goodtape" was used.

The challenges encountered included finding potential study participants and the low levels of willingness and trust of potential interviewees due to the sensitive topic of the study in the threatening political context with the increasingly restrictive policy and implementation (e.g. intensified checks by the police and Border Guard, as well as growing deportation cases) (Matuszczyk et al., 2024). At the time of the study, the topic of irregular migration was highly politicised. Time constraints of couriers who worked long hours made meetings with potential participants difficult, with many postponed appointments.

4. Main Findings from the Ethnographic Part

The study shows the complexity of delivery workers' experiences regarding their work and residence statuses that are derived both from restrictive immigration policy, the politicisation of migration, and still unregulated platform work in Poland, mainly arranged through intermediary actors (fleet partners). Even in the cases of relatively stable situations related to having a student status or a temporary residence card due to work, the prospects of our participants were marked by uncertainty about the opportunity to obtain or extend a residence permit in Poland. For example, during the interviews, our thirteen study participants were awaiting decisions on their temporary residence permits (TRC), which heightened their sense of uncertainty while simultaneously “tying” them to work in the delivery sector as a chance to secure financial resources. Among those who applied based on studies or employment, at least 4 participants reported receiving rejections and subsequently filed appeals.

4.1. The irregularities of stay and the instability of legal status

This lack of stability was closely related to the limited opportunities to obtain temporary residence permits based on work.²⁸ This was due to the difficulty in meeting legal requirements imposed by the legalisation procedure, such as having a formal work contract (either a contract of employment or a contract of mandate) and receiving at least a salary that matches the minimum wage and the amount stated in the contract. Another important issue was the question of whether fleet partners were paying the required taxes and social security contributions (e.g. ZUS) as required. In the majority of our cases, work was performed on the basis of mandate and rental agreements with reduced or no social security contributions covered by partners, making them ineligible as a basis for temporary residence permit. The need to meet these conditions for applying for legal residence and for work to be recognised as legal was also emphasised by our expert interviewee.

Several cases revealed that student status, which formally provides access to employment and the possibility to apply for a residence permit, was also marked by complexity and uncertainty (according to the legal state before novelisation mentioned above). One major risk was the potential loss of student status — and, with it, the associated rights — due to extensive work commitments, which often led to absences or exam failures. Long working hours have also taken a physical toll, causing fatigue and making it difficult for students to concentrate on their studies.

An important insight into the uncertainty surrounding work and legal status was provided by a study participant from Ukraine, who had been working as a courier since the COVID-19 pandemic. He was refused an extension of his work agreement because his temporary residence permit had expired. However, under special regulations for

²⁸ In the report the term “work” is used instead of “employment” to underline the specificity of how the platform economy is organised in reference to the labour law in Poland.

Ukrainian citizens, all such documents were officially extended. In his view, the company did not know how to handle the situation. The decision not to renew his and several other couriers' contracts coincided with an inspection by the Labour Inspectorate, which imposed several fines on the company.

Although it was not a common solution among study participants, some mentioned that they had considered or applied for a temporary residence permit based on their work in the delivery sector through fleet partners, who declared such support. For those who did consider this option, the main challenge was managing to cover all the required expenses. One delivery rider mentioned that the fleet partner deducted over 450 euros (around 2,000 PLN) per month for this procedure from the remuneration for delivery work. Another challenge was the dishonest intermediaries who exploited couriers by taking high commissions while failing to fulfil the obligations necessary for the legalisation process. One participant shared that although his fleet partner assured him that the required taxes were being paid to support his residence permit application, he ultimately received a rejection. It turned out that the partner had not paid the taxes as promised.

4.2. Irregularities of work

Another dimension was the irregularities related to work arrangements. Work in the delivery sector was characterised by study participants as easily accessible, as the recruitment process was primarily conducted online. Typically, companies require applicants to submit only an ID and bank account details. Additional documents requested by fleet partners varied. For example, student participants mentioned they were asked to provide proof of student status once, but this was not verified again later. Others reported submitting their PESEL (Polish identification number), while a few mentioned providing visas or residence cards.

These differences suggest that fleet partners operate under varying practices, particularly since the employment of couriers and the responsibilities of fleet partners remain largely unregulated. This regulatory gap allows companies to adapt employment practices in accordance with their interests and business strategies, creating space for malpractice and a lack of transparency for couriers. For example, several participants mentioned that their contracts were signed online and that they never visited a physical office. Some participants admitted they did not know what type of contract they had, as the documents were provided only in Polish or made available solely online. Couriers reflected on potential irregularities based on their own experiences or those of friends and colleagues. One example shared was that fleet partners may collaborate with other companies that apply for residence permits on behalf of workers. Another example was the opportunity to work using the account belonging to someone else, who was already registered.

4.3. The impact of irregularities on working and living conditions

The main reasons for working in the delivery sector were the flexibility and relative autonomy in managing work schedules and other obligations such as education (formal and informal), jobs in other sectors, and parental responsibilities. The study participants agreed that, especially compared to jobs with fixed shifts or direct supervision, the delivery sector allowed them to arrange their working hours based on other duties, weather conditions, and personal well-being. However, not everyone had the opportunity to make such choices, and this flexibility and autonomy often translated into excessively long working hours.

4.4. Work conditions and impact on health, access to social security

The majority of participants reported working in delivery for 10–12 hours on weekdays and weekends to cover essential living expenses. Those who combined delivery work with studies or other jobs often worked late into the evenings and on weekends. This demanding schedule led to fatigue, and many participants also reported being deprived of days off or holidays, as time off directly impacted their income. Maximising working hours was often driven by the need to cover constant expenses, including bike rental costs, university fees, accommodation, family-related expenses, or costs of legalization procedures.

The irregularity of delivery work also encompasses health risks, particularly when working in harsh weather conditions (e.g., cold temperatures, snow, or rain). Platform companies or fleet partners do not provide couriers with waterproof or warm clothing, nor do they offer additional protection for their equipment. Couriers reported that they had to purchase such items themselves. One study participant shared that during winter, he wore three pairs of gloves to protect his hands while riding a scooter. Another mentioned that snow and rain impaired visibility inside the helmet and made it difficult to use the phone while driving. Weather conditions also negatively impacted phone batteries.

Another issue raised by participants was the condition of the roads and traffic during bad weather. Slippery surfaces increase the risk of accidents. The most striking issue that highlighted the precarious nature of delivery work was that, instead of taking steps to care for couriers, companies encouraged them to take risks and work faster or longer hours by offering bonuses or additional pay for completing more deliveries in poor weather conditions. Participants also mentioned street traffic, which exposes couriers to the constant noise of engines and other vehicles, interactions with pedestrians, who were sometimes inattentive or even rude to delivery workers.

The collected materials also reflected an aspect of irregularity related to the lack of regulations on the weight of deliveries, which poses additional risks to couriers' health. Several study participants who use electric bikes and scooters reported suffering from back and neck pain, as deliveries often include heavy items such as multiple bottles of water. This issue has become more common as delivery services have expanded beyond food and catering to include commodities and groceries.

In almost all interviews, we noticed the lack of health insurance provided by the platform companies or fleet partners. Due to the specific structure of contractual agreements (e.g., mandate contracts and rental agreements), fleet partners cover only a minimum or no social insurance contributions (ZUS), nor do they provide private insurance. Although some study participants mentioned that private insurance was offered by a few companies, it typically involved additional fees deducted from couriers' remuneration. Some couriers stated that their main source of health insurance came from being enrolled into university (which provides social insurance), or from other jobs held concurrently. Another example mentioned was the purchase of minimal insurance packages from private insurers, but these were primarily acquired to meet the legal requirements for obtaining a temporary residence permit rather than for actual healthcare coverage. This point was confirmed in our expert interview with an insurance agent.

Another significant finding from the interviews was that most participants reported minimal contact with medical institutions to date, which they attributed to being in good health. However, some couriers reported having accidents while working. One participant had been hospitalised, while others mentioned seeking medical care either privately or through ZUS insurance obtained from other employment.

4.5. Working conditions and financial instability

Despite excessive working hours, the main challenge mentioned by the courier participants was the unpredictability of income derived from several factors: algorithm-determined and frequently changing rates; the dynamic nature of daily orders, which vary by day and weather conditions; the seasonality of the work, with higher demand during the autumn-winter period and a drop in summer; competition from the number of couriers; and, most significantly, account blocking. Several study interviewees shared that their accounts had been suddenly blocked without any investigation from the company, often due to customer complaints. Blocking of accounts not only made it impossible to work for a certain time using the particular application, but also impacted the rating, which is directly linked to how the application assigns orders. The necessity to rent equipment, especially electric bicycles or scooters, placed an additional financial burden on the couriers.

Another dimension contributing to the precariousness of their situation was exposure to malpractice by fleet partners. Some participants recalled situations that happened to them or involving their friends where the fleet partners simply disappeared without paying the remuneration. In all reported cases of exploitation or malpractice by fleet partners, study participants chose to switch companies rather than contact public authorities or support institutions. This reflected a broader lack of trust in public institutions and the complexity of the irregularities couriers face. These factors might prevent them from seeking formal support.

Despite a high level of uncertainty related to this work, the study participants underlined the limited exit opportunities from the sector and chances to develop a career more aligned with their previous professional background and education. Some study participants highlighted the lack of alternatives because of the language barriers and difficulties in the recognition of their foreign education and diplomas.

Their financial standing and the perspective of further career plans aligned with the housing situation. The study presented a spectrum of housing accommodation conditions. Due to the ethnographic work, one of the community researchers visited two workers' hostels for platform workers, both taxi drivers and couriers. Among students, university accommodation prevailed due to its more accessible costs, although it was temporary. Such a type of accommodation was provided for each year, so study participants underlined that for the next academic year, they would have to apply for it again. Popular among our interviewees was to share flats with co-nationals or friends. Materials collected revealed the significant impact of income instability on the participants' ability to change or improve their current living conditions. While most participants felt it was relatively easy to find accommodation through online platforms and noted a general openness among people to rent to foreigners, the main barrier for them was the high rent cost, which made it nearly impossible to rent independently. Some participants also noted a significant shift in housing costs and the availability of work before and after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Linking the aspects of couriers' work and living spaces was particularly interesting from the perspective of navigating the temporariness associated with migration. During a follow-up interview, one of the study participants shared that it was only after six months of renting a room in a shared flat that he decided to start decorating it, making it a more personalised and private space.

4.6. Delivery work and family life

The collected empirical data also allowed us to observe several implications that intensive work in the delivery sector had on the family lives of the study participants, including opportunities to establish relationships, maintain contact with parents and extended family members, as well as with partners and children, and the burden of parental responsibilities. Some participants also declined to speak about their family situation, which might show the sensitivity of the topic of their work in the delivery sector. The majority of study participants were single. Intensive work schedules, income uncertainties, and the temporary nature of their residence and housing made it difficult to establish relationships or plan for family life. Most of them were also separated from their parents and family members, who remained in their home regions or countries. Maintaining regular contact with family abroad via WhatsApp or other social media platforms was important although limited due to long working hours and time differences. For those who live in Poland with partners, two forms of dependencies could be observed. The first example concerned being covered by the wife's public insurance due to the lack of individual insurance as a delivery rider. Another example highlighted financial instability and the need to rely on support provided by a partner's family member.

Participants with children also offered a perspective on responsibilities for household incomes and for managing parental duties. On the one hand, despite the burden and physical challenges of delivery work, participants also highlighted some positive aspects. For example, flexibility can be important from the perspective of parental responsibilities. One person mentioned:

When my wife was pregnant, I needed to go to the hospital with the baby for the checkup so I could just go offline and do these things, come back home, go online again and work. [MIG03_DEL_PL]

On the other hand, to secure sufficient financial resources, it was necessary to work long hours and on weekends, which also limited time spent with children. A delivery rider with two children emphasized the burden of taxes and other work-related expenses, which significantly reduced his earnings compared to those benefiting from tax relief (i.e. individuals under 26 years old):

When the state gives a young person a relief, like, "Okay, you don't have to pay taxes, you're young" — and I hear something like that, it really hits me hard. I work every day, just like him, 10 hours a day, sometimes even 16, and I still can't make ends meet. I earn 5,000, and he earns 13,000. And I feel like my hands are tied, because I have more responsibilities. I have to devote myself to my family. I have to give more, and give, and give of myself. [MIG16_DEL_PL]

Another participant, who lived in Poland with his wife and two daughters, highlighted that he had to work on weekends, as this is when demand for deliveries is higher. He emphasized the need to work harder because family expenses and the cost of living had doubled, while the basic delivery rates had not increased:

Simply saying, we are too tired from working. Every day, we just wake up, take one bag, and drive a scooter all day getting orders, going to customers, climbing to the 4th, 5th or 6th floor, maybe an elevator is out of order.... Because I've got a family I need to feed them...my income has not doubled. Income is the same. What has doubled is working time... What can we do? Nothing...Most probably, pray. Or start a new [business]. The majority of people... start some business after some time. Or they get tired and just go back or to some other country... [MIG03_DEL_PL]

Both examples show that in terms of family life, the intensity of the workload, instability, and risks associated with delivery work may reinforce traditional patriarchal patterns, where men are seen as primary “breadwinners” and due to long working hours are deprived of meaningful contact with their partners and children.

4.7. Social and institutional encounters: positive and negative experiences

Although participants generally described their work positively, some of them experienced such negative situations as bike theft, stereotyping, generalisation, and ethnic or racial discrimination from clients, passersby or public institutions. One important aspect related to the specific ‘visibility’ of delivery riders and their exposure to risks was the reported experience of racist attitudes and unequal treatment. Our participant from Western Asia had his account blocked because of a complaint filed by a customer who was racist and assaulted him, calling him a “Muslim terrorist”. Some couriers mentioned that they experienced negative reactions from people on the streets. They were mainly from more “distant” countries, which shows the problem of racial prejudice and othering based on appearance, religion, and origin. The interviewee from Belarus recalled an incident of microaggression rooted in ethnicisation and generalisation, where he heard the comment: “Go back to Ukraine”.

In addition to experiences with contacts with clients or other people, study participants also mentioned negative encounters with public institutions, primarily the City Guard (Pol. Straż Miejska). Such profiling was often based on the riders’ appearance, reflecting racial profiling rooted in stereotypes and prejudices:

...with the lighter-skinned couriers, you speak to them sometimes...you hear that “oh no, I don’t have this problem of being stopped”. But I have a friend who also works as a courier; he’s black, he’s South African, and he’s been stopped quite a few times as well... they might think that he’s suspicious. And I have another friend who’s much lighter-skinned; he’s from Colombia. And you know how these countries are so suspicious in terms of Colombia, they think of drugs. So every time he’s just walking around or doing whatever, he is stopped to be asked for the passport or whatever his situation is... [MIG15_DEL_PL_F]

It is also important to highlight that not all study participants reported negative experiences related to discrimination. This may reflect a methodological limitation and reluctance to share such stories by interviewees with researchers. However, it is also worthwhile to point to positive experiences in social encounters. Several participants emphasised that they did not face negative attitudes and, on the contrary, received support from people they met or had positive experiences with public institutions. Positive experiences and the absence of direct discrimination appeared to play a significant role in building social networks that offer support. One of the participants mentioned above noted that he had several Polish friends who were helping him learn the language. Another one emphasised that his Polish colleagues at his main workplace provided him with essential emotional support and practical assistance in dealing with legalisation procedures.

4.8. Social contacts and access to support

The work in the delivery sector turned out to be highly individualised. Making new social connections during work was described as rare, as the character of the job is largely solitary. Spaces for interaction included spots where couriers wait for orders, company-organised hubs (especially in companies offering grocery delivery), and social media chat groups.

An important aspect of self-organisation was the use of online chats, for example, groups on social media platforms like Telegram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. Such online groups were either organised by couriers themselves or members of specific migrant communities to exchange experiences about different fleet partners, share useful information, and buy or sell necessary equipment.

However, in terms of more institutionalised support, the vast majority of riders were not aware of and did not participate in courier unions or other advocacy initiatives, some also mentioned that they were rather reluctant to contact institutions such as the labour inspectorate, the police, or social organisations in cases of violations of their working rights. However, in questions related to legalisation procedure, contact with support institutions was more frequent. Migration-related civil society organisations and commercial services, such as lawyers, were mentioned in interviews as important sources of support, particularly for dealing with legalisation procedures. However, there was also visible criticism concerning commercial legal services offered to migrants looking for help in legislation procedures, voiced by our interviewees in WP5 and WP3 (Matuszczyk et al., 2024). It included high costs and ineffective help, with examples of failures and misleading advice. Importantly, despite experiencing various violations of their labour rights as well as instances of aggression and discrimination, the interviewees rarely contacted public institutions for help. When they did, it was most often in cases such as bicycle theft or when one participant was threatened by a stranger on public transportation. Study participants mention that they probably could do so, but it was not necessary for them. This may also reflect both a lack of trust in effective help and a fear of public institutions in Poland, and a reluctance to seek contact, especially in cases involving complex residence and employment situations.

5. Concluding Remarks

Irregularities related to working as couriers in the food platform-based delivery sector are embedded in the complex context of three interrelated aspects. The first key factor refers to the fragmented and unregulated platform market in the context of ongoing work on the implementation of the EU directive into national legal frameworks (Owczarek, 2022; Muszyński et al., 2024). This creates space and legal loopholes for non-transparent mechanisms used by international platforms and fleet partners to maximise their profits at the cost of workers' rights. Secondly, a significant impact on working and living conditions is the specific nature of the Polish labour market, derived from the post-transformation dynamics of economic growth, which normalise the popularity of civil law contracts. These contracts sustain temporality and do not provide workers with adequate social protection. The third aspect concerns the dynamics of migration processes and migration policy. Scholars underline that Poland became a "new immigration destination" for workers not only from countries of origin previously typical for Poland (e.g. Ukraine) but also from geographically more distant countries (Matuszczyk & Okólski, 2023). On the other hand, the current government's migration policy follows the path of further politicisation of migration and focuses on tightening restrictions on international migration. While the first two aspects define the context of precarious working conditions for all delivery workers, their intersection with the third adds important aspects to the situation of people with migration and refugee experiences. Study participants experience work in the delivery sector differently, depending on their legal status, socio-economic situation, as well as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and parental obligations.

To summarise, the assemblage of irregularities related to the delivery sector in Poland encompasses the instability of legal status and limited opportunities to secure legal stay on the basis of this work. Even the situation of students, a privileged group of migrants in the delivery sector, appeared to be unstable due to

difficulties in obtaining visas, further complexities of long-lasting administrative procedures and formal requirements for foreign students, and risks of losing student status. Another dimension of irregularities refers to employment arrangements related to the types of contracts prevailing in Poland, predominantly mandate and rental contracts, which limited the possibility to obtain temporary residence permits. Our study also showed that intermediary actors do not comply with legislation requirements (e.g. avoid paying ZUS contributions) and develop practices to overcome administrative requirements. Such practices put delivery workers at risk of falling into irregularity while working without a permit or on the basis of documents issued by other employers. Intermediary actors exploit the migrants' lack of knowledge, limited access to support, and urgent need to work and earn a living by creating arrangements that place migrant couriers in a vulnerable position. In cases of malpractice by fleet partners, our participants did not decide to seek institutional support.

The delivery sector in Poland is largely male-dominated, which may reinforce patriarchal masculinity within a traditionally gendered division of labour. This helps platforms sustain the exploitative nature of the work, which primarily targets young men who often face structural barriers to career development in other sectors and personal (family) life. The irregularities experienced by study participants have an impact on both their everyday lives and their households. First of all, couriers experience a range of risks related to their health and well-being, which are linked to difficult weather conditions, heavy deliveries, the risk of accidents during work, exposure to noise and pollution as well as lack of space to rest. Other risks are related to the instability of income due to lack of minimal wages, low rider's accounts rates, unpredictability of ordering, and risks of being banned by the application as well as high expenses (e.g. vehicle rental, accommodation, insurance, or university tuition etc). The instability of income pushes people to work more and to perceive flexibility as a perspective of work up to the physical limits (Polkowska, 2024, 2025; Pieczka & Miszczyński, 2024).

Our research also reflects the intersecting power inequalities at the relational dimension. Although platform work became more associated with migrants, a public debate developed around the criminalisation of their work and clients' safety (e.g. cases related to taxi drivers) while the awareness of their working conditions and rights remains limited. Several study participants experienced racial and ethnic discrimination from clients, passersby, and public authorities. One of the most common problems experienced by study participants was bike theft. However, these experiences varied, and some participants emphasised that they had not encountered any negative incidents in Poland.

The main source of support for participants was informal social networks, especially close friends as well as virtual communities, mainly groups on social media. Commercial actors play a double role, as they serve as support during legalisation procedures, but can also be dysfunctional due to malpractices. Institutional support for migrant delivery workers is limited. Even though labour unions focus on advocating for delivery workers' rights and, civil society organisations offer various forms of integration-related support (e.g., Polish language courses), the study does not identify any institutions that combine expertise in both platform work and migration-related issues. The empirical data collected highlights several obstacles to grassroots mobilisation, including the perceived temporariness of work in the delivery sector, the dispersed and individualised nature of the job, limited language accessibility of labour unions, high workloads, lack of time, and a high level of informality and mistrust which may prevent couriers from contacting public institutions.

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Annex

Table 1. Delivery workers participating in the interviews

Nr.	Yoda codes	Age	Gender	Region of Origin	Legal status	Family status	Where are family members
1	MIG01_DEL_PL	20s	M	Western Asia	awaiting for TRC	Single	non-EU country
2	MIG02_DEL_PL	Late 20s	M	Central Asia	in the procedure for international protection	Single	non-EU country
3	MIG03_DEL_PL	30s	M	South Asia	residency based on marriage with a Polish citizen	Married, 2 kids	Poland
4	MIG04_DEL_PL	Late 20s	M	South Asia	student visa, TRC (temporary residence card), awaiting a new TRC procedure	Single	non-EU country
5	MIG05_DEL_PL	20s	M	South Asia	student visa, TRC	Single	non-EU country
6	MIG06_DEL_PL	30s	M	South Asia	awaiting for TRC	Married, 1 kid	non-EU country
7	MIG07_DEL_PL	20s	M	South Asia	student visa and TRC	Single	non-EU country
8	MIG08_DEL_PL	20s	M	South Asia	student visa, awaiting TRC	Single	non-EU country
9	MIG09_DEL_PL	20s	F	Central Asia	student visa, rejected application for residence	Single	non-EU country
10	MIG10_DEL_PL	under 20s	M	Western Asia	student visa	Single	non-EU country
11	MIG11_DEL_PL	20s	M	Western Asia	awaiting for TRC	Single	non-EU country
12	MIG12_DEL_PL	20s	M	Central Asia	TRC, then rejection and awaiting a new procedure for TRC	Single	non-EU country
13	MIG13_DEL_PL	30s	M	Central Asia	working visa, awaiting TRC	Single	non-EU country
14	MIG14_DEL_PL	20s	M	Middle East	student visa, TRC rejected, awaiting a new TRC procedure	In relationship	non-EU country
15	MIG15_DEL_PL	20s	M	Africa	working visa, awaiting the TRC procedure	Single	non-EU country
16	MIG16_DEL_PL	40s	M	Eastern Europe	acquired Polish citizenship	Married, 2 kids	Poland
17	MIG17_DEL_PL	20s	M	Eastern Europe	biometric passport, working visa, TRC	Single	non-EU country

18	MIG18_DEL_PL	20s	M	Eastern Europe	TRC was prolonged due to special regulations, awaiting the TRC procedure	Single	Poland
19	MIG19_DEL_PL	30s	M	Eastern Europe	visa, rejected TRC, international protection	Single	non-EU country
20	MIG20_DEL_PL	20s	M	Central Asia	student visa, TRC	Single	non-EU country
21	MIG21_DEL_PL	20s	M	Eastern Europe	student visa	Single	non-EU country
22	MIG22_DEL_PL	20s	M	South Asia	student visa, TRC, awaiting a new procedure for TRC	Single	non-EU country
23	MIG23_DEL_PL	20s	M	Africa	international protection	Single	non-EU country
24	MIG24_DEL_PL	early 20s	M	Africa	student visa	Single	non-EU country

Table 2. Object based follow-up interviews with delivery workers

1	Western Asia	MIG10_DEL_PL_Follow_up
2	Central Asia	MIG13_DEL_PL_Follow_up
3	Africa	MIG15_DEL_PL_Follow_up
4	Eastern Europe	MIG18_DEL_PL_Follow_up
5	Eastern Europe	MIG19_DEL_PL_Follow_up

Table 3. Expert interviews for delivery work sector

1	researcher, specialist in platform economy and labour regulations	EXPo1_DEL_PL
2	researcher, specialises in platform economy and working conditions	EXPo2_DEL_PL
3	representative of a labour union	EXPo3_LAB_DEL_PL
4	representative of an insurance company	EXPo4_extra_DEL_PL
5	representative of a platform company	EXPo5_CTX_DEL_PL
6	researcher, lawyer, specialises in platform economy and labour law	EXPo6_LAW_DEL_PL
7	representative of a labour union	EXPo7_LAB_DEL_PL
8	lawyer, specialises in migration law and legislation procedures	EXPo8_LAW_DEL_PL
9	representative of a labour union	EXPo9_LAB_DEL_PL

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