

# Strapped to the app? Bridled labor at the crossroads of platform delivery and migration regulation

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Sebastian Cobarrubias

*ARAID Research Agency, Zaragoza, Spain and*

*GEOT Research Group, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain*

Maribel Casas-Cortés and Pablo Sanz de Miguel

*Department of Psychology and Sociology,*

*GISCI Research Group, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain, and*

Miguel Montañés Grado

*GISCI Research Group, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The paper aims to analyze the configuration of specific forms of undeclared work which are becoming widespread in the digital food-delivery sector in Spain and are predominantly occupied by migrant labor with employment and/or residence restrictions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Our analysis includes a desk research review of relevant regulatory frameworks, specifically, national labor and migratory legislations, semi-structured interviews with labor inspectorates and trade unions, as well as ethnographic interviews with migrant riders in three Spanish cities.

**Findings** – Our research unveils how current platform delivery configurations attract and confine migrant labor. The current migration regime, with its multiple migration statuses, productively articulates with account-based forms of enrollment facilitated by digital platform infrastructures. The contingent entanglement between a regime of flexible platform labor and a restrictive regime of migration management encourages irregular forms of work and the external disciplining of couriers. This entanglement provokes an increasingly international workforce to be “strapped” to undeclared delivery.

**Social implications** – Our research shows how the solution based on the re-classification of worker’s status toward a standard employment relationship is limited in its scope when the platform economy becomes dependent on migrant labor with shifting administrative restrictions. Policymakers and trade unions should consider improvements in the resolutions procedures of residence and work applications. As a medium-term implication, our research calls for a profound reconsideration of current migration management policies in light of their intersection with flexibilizing labor markets in the platform economy.

**Originality/value** – This is the first paper that draws on Yann Moulier-Boutang’s theoretical insights to analyze and further interpret undeclared work in the food-delivery platform sector, specifically in Spain.

**Keywords** Undeclared work, Migration policies, Labor policies, Migrant labor, Platform delivery sector

**Paper type** Research article

## 1. Introduction

Existing literature has extensively shown how digital platforms create controversial forms of work relationships which undermine labor rights, mainly through the mis-classification of workers circumventing national labor legislations (Aloisi, 2022); as well as relying upon opaque forms of algorithmic management (Ferrari and Graham, 2021; Kellogg *et al.*, 2020).

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Critical analyses diagnose an intensification of precarious conditions and informality in flexible platform labor (Schor *et al.*, 2020; Vallas and Schor, 2020), concretely in the sector of app-based food delivery, but also in the domestic care sector where platforms perpetuate the invisibility and informality of such work or blur the boundaries between formal and informal work (Dimitriadis and Coletto, 2024; Pulignano *et al.*, 2023; Anwar and Graham, 2021; Popan, 2021). Yet, there is a key factor that further problematizes the analysis of platform labor: the dependence on non-citizen workers. There is growing data alluding to the significant presence of migrant labor in platforms despite the methodological challenges to measure its exact proportions given the difficulty of tracing non-formal labor relations (Urzi Brancati *et al.*, 2019; Zwysen and Piasna, 2024; van Doorn *et al.*, 2022, p. 1). The emerging literature on migrant platform labor calls for a more comprehensive scholarly analysis of the co-constitution of both migratory and labor regimes, as well as finding better policy solutions to regulate the platform economy (Altenried, 2021; Schaupp, 2022; van Doorn and Vijay, 2021). A subset of this literature focuses on the rise of informalities emerging from platform recruitment of migrant labor with a precarious administrative status. This mostly ethnographic based research is shedding light into forms of irregular subcontracting and the proliferation of multi-user accounts in platform work, especially in the food-delivery sector (Mendonça *et al.*, 2023; Baril, 2024; Bonhomme and Muldoon, 2025; Casas-Cortés, 2025).

Building upon this literature on platforms and migration, we contend that to assemble a more accurate understanding of platform labor, it is vital to introduce the question of the shifting and conditioning administrative status of migrant couriers, signaling the importance of the current migration regime within which platform delivery operates. More specifically, this paper analyzes how the interplay between two regulatory frameworks – labor and migration – contributes to the confinement of those with short-term permits to reside and/or work to undeclared forms of platform labor growing in the Spanish delivery sector [1]. We identify this configuration of labor primarily in our case study of *Glovo*, the main food-delivery platform in the Spanish market, since the passing of the Riders' Act by the Ministry of Labor in August 2021.

Our paper 7 contends that critical migration literature, specifically the tradition of Autonomy of Migration (AoM), can contribute in rich ways to understand platform capitalism (Altenried *et al.*, 2021; van Doorn and Vijay, 2021; Mezzadra *et al.*, 2024). Furthering this quest, we draw on the work of one of AoM's founders, Yann Moulier-Boutang and his concept of bridled labor developed in *De l'esclavage au salariat* (2006). Rather than engaging typologies of un-free labor, we offer a preliminary conceptualization of migrant delivery work as "platform bridled labor" by engaging the consequences brought by the overlapping of migration's over-regulation and platform labor's hyper-flexibilization.

## 2. The concept of bridled labor

For AoM scholars, migration legislation generates a situation in which large sectors of a population living in the same territory have unequal conditions and enter the labor market through processes of "differential inclusion" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Precarious administrative statuses produced by categories of migration regulations create a labor reservoir often excluded from long-term salaried forms of employment (Tazzioli, 2019). This fits in with the flexibilizing tendency in labor practices based on short-term relationships and task-driven forms of payment (Woodcock and Graham, 2020). Platform labor via digital apps further spreads this gig labor model and facilitates highly informal, permissive and uncompliant modes of recruitment and supervision in the labor process (Schaupp, 2022). As such, platforms can "ensnare" those left outside formal types of employment through particular labor and migratory legislations (van Doorn, 2017). Well before the advent of the gig economy, Bridget Anderson pointed out this entanglement of seemingly opposite tendencies that fuel each other: on the one hand, highly rigid and classificatory migration legislation, and on the other, a highly flexible and permissive labor legislation (Anderson, 2015).

The entanglement of these two regulatory frameworks, labor and migration, engender forms of work that are not completely free, according to Yann Moulier-Boutang. This is his thesis advanced in his genealogical study of salaried work relationships entitled *De l'esclavage au salariat: Economie historique du salariat bridé* (2006) [2]. In contrast to the liberal theoretical ideal of “free labor”, his concept of “bridled labor” refers to work situations with less labor rights than the established regulatory framework and less possibilities to move or switch jobs than the ordinary workforce. Moulier-Boutang analyzes the historical genealogies of regulatory frameworks leading to specific notions of “worker” and “foreigner” in countries of the Global North.

Moulier-Boutang points to the abolition of modern slavery during the 19th century as unfolding into different types of coerced or “bridled” labor. It was the development of policies re-regulating the circulation of semi/ex-slave labor, that defined how mobile people were to be governed, how their mobility could be harnessed, and how their constant escapes and fleeing could be dealt with. For Moulier-Boutang, the control of mobility is the principal means for managing a labor force that is not yet free. As a response, contemporaneous authorities and their immediate successors attempted to manage the excess mobility of slave/ex-slave labor through a long and incomplete process of abolition accompanied by inter-state (often imperial-state) legal restructuring. Moulier-Boutang deciphers how salaried work constitutes a sought-after solution for those who required a loyal, sedentary, or at least predictable, workforce, hoping to avoid or reduce the constant movement of people (Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias, 2024). For Moulier-Boutang, these institutional actions, which simultaneously authorize and ratify opposed practices in relation to the freedom of movement and labor, are key to understanding the contradictions in contemporary migratory policy where certain mobilities have an almost free hand while others are tightly controlled. It was this historical period in which:

A constant feature of developed countries and the liberal ambiguity par excellence began to install itself: the alleged support for the free circulation of people that was based to a large degree on a march of many centuries toward the freedom to flee, and on the other side, a total sub-estimation – or tacit silence– of the condition of limiting that same freedom in the name of economic reason (Moulier-Boutang, 2006, p. 604).

According to Moulier-Boutang, this historical process of slavery’s abolition constitutes the foundation of current labor markets and migratory regimes, as well as their internal contradictions, engendering modes of stratification in the labor market based on dynamics of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, these newer labor regimes no longer differentiate free/unfree in strict geographic terms of metropole and colony, rather the repercussion of free/unfree occurs within industrial capitalism. Concretely, the creation of foreign worker statutes facilitates the management of the mobility of different groups of people in such a way as to guarantee a “dependent” labor force (Moulier-Boutang, 2006, p. 530). In this regard, to understand how labor is bridled according to Moulier-Boutang, labor legislation and migration legislation are not to be understood in isolation from one another. The intersections and even contradictions between these bodies of regulations, institutions and discourses need to be analyzed in practice. As Moulier-Boutang suggests, the exclusion of foreigners from the category of national workers, though not from work, belies the notion of worker protection and the basic ability to change jobs for many platform migrant laborers.

### 2.1 Applying the concept of bridled labor to platform research

The need to focus on migrant platform labor is a recurring call in both labor studies and migration studies [3]. The relevance of mobile populations to the current development of the platform sector has been such that Van Dorn and Vijay state: “The movement of people within and across borders in search of work and a better future thus seems to constitute a critical condition ensuring the existence of urban gig economies” (2021, p. 1130). In rethinking current platform practices of enlisting, Casas-Cortés has further reinforced the constituent role of migration in reshaping platform forms of labor recruitment (2025). Thus, these authors

identify the need to theorize how the presence of migrant labor is becoming central to the development of the platform economy.

Responding to this call, our argument contributes to the ongoing theorization of the entanglement between migration regimes and platform-mediated labor regimes. We particularly draw from literature analyzing how the temporalities of certain residence permits (such as student permits or asylum status), both facilitate and tie certain people into the platform economy (Orth, 2023; Maury *et al.*, 2024; Diz and Casas-Cortés, 2024). When examining the intersection of migration and the platform economy in this way, platform labor does not appear as a “stepping stone” for transitioning into more stable and secure forms of employment (Floros and Galis, 2024). Instead, platform migrant labor emerges as a site of “constraint” (Maury *et al.*, 2024, p. 3768). While populations with non-citizenship status are able to access this labor market due to the less strident requirements of entry (e.g. Altenried, 2021), research has examined the degree to which migrants – under different categories within the border regime – become, and perceive themselves to have become, entrapped in the in/mobilities of platform gigs (Diz and Casas-Cortés, 2024). Zhou refers to an imposed “stickiness” of platform labor for rural-urban migrants in urban China (2024). Katta *et al.* speak of the “predatory inclusion” of migrants with precarious administrative statuses as key to the survival and growth of platform-based service apps (Katta *et al.*, 2024). Van Doorn and Vijay refer to platforms as capable of “ensnaring” migrants through a relatively easy onboarding process that incorporates people with few options beyond the app (2021). Newlands refers directly to an “entrapment hypothesis” (Newlands, 2024, p. 1265) regarding migrants in platform labor, referring to both self-perceptions by gig workers and perceptions by other future employers. In her analysis of platform work in Finland, Maury *et al.* argue: “the contemporary Finnish welfare state may consequently serve as a hotbed for platform companies to thrive in precisely because of policies designed to protect workers and their efforts at reproduction, but which, through the welfare state bordering of mobile labour, achieves quite the opposite” (2024, p. 2). It is precisely these kinds of observations that lead us to propose “bridled labor” as a tool to theorize the seemingly contradictory relations reproducing the current configuration of platform labor.

Concurring with the thrust of empirical observations about how certain migrants are steered toward and channeled into app-based platform labor as the “only feasible alternative” (using recurrent words from our informants), our goal in this paper is to further engage and conceptualize this observed entrapment, or sense of being “pushed” and “held” into forms of platform labor. For this exploratory conceptual engagement, we find the tradition of AoM particularly pertinent for its revalorization of migration and migration/border policy in the reshaping of labor dynamics (e.g. Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Specifically, Yann Moulrier-Boutang develops the notion of “bridled labor” as a way to understand how this entanglement is not coincidental, but rather a *longue durée* relation pushed and pulled in different directions due to changing political circumstances, including patterns of migration and mobility, regimes of citizenship or geopolitical shifts.

Thus, in addition to describing migrants as being steered and trapped toward and in platform labor, bridled labor as a concept provides a means to understand the intersection of stagnating migration categories with hyper flexible forms of platform labor. Rather than a random occurrence, migrant platform labor responds to a longer-term and intertwined dynamic between migration and labor policies. This is not to say that specific migration categories (e.g. work visa, student visa, asylum seeker) constitute direct and intentional responses to specific labor policy developments (e.g. guest workers programs for post–Second World War reconstructions). Though this historically may have been the case on concrete occasions, Moulrier-Boutang points to how this overlapping between national labor markets and foreign-origin labor usually unfolds in more serendipitous yet material ways. This imbrication can result from attempts at taming unexpected mobilities, which in the process are turned into profitable sources of labor once they are categorized under certain restrictions. For instance, specific industries, or whole economic sectors, may benefit from

particular categorizations produced by the border regime, which for different reasons (limitations on further mobility, or restrictions on changing labor contracts), make those holding that status, particularly preferable for that sector. This overlapping of interests – the company’s opportunity to profit and the foreign person’s opportunity to labor – often unfolds through inadvertent developments. The nexus between migration and platform capitalism seen under the prism of AoM takes on more conceptual weight: those “experiences of constraint” are not only empirical observations or subjective descriptions of lived reality on the part of riders. The concept of bridled labor finds a way to think through this form of accessible yet confining labor as a broader geo-historical pattern in which capitalism deploys opposite yet co-existing forms of free and non-totally free labor based on the responses to the politically produced in/ability to move.

Recent approaches to platform labor have also begun to explore the potential use of this concept (Peano and Sacchi, 2023). Stefania Animento shows how platforms constitute digital infrastructures which allow migrant workers to develop contingent migratory projects, but also entrap them into dynamics of hyper-exploitation (Animento, 2023, p. 135). Similarly, Gianmarco Peterlongo points to how the “platform economy is today an infrastructure for migrant labor [where] a dynamic of *labor entrapment* emerges, to the point of determining a sort of parallel labor market characterized by the indeterminacy of employment” (Peterlongo, 2023, p. 115). A further study, following Moulrier-Boutang’s insight on how forms of unfree labor have always co-existed with wage labor (1998), concludes that the bridling of labor under platform capitalism entails “*confinement* into a labor relationship which workers would like to exit but are not able to, because of a lack of alternatives” (Animento, 2024, p. 138) [4].

### 3. Methodology

Our study explores app-based food delivery in Spain, focusing on the largest company, Glovo Inc, as part of a broader national research project on the sector [5]. The study’s methodology combines desk research with fieldwork in the sector, mainly through semi-structured and ethnographic interviews. For Moulrier-Boutang, both labor and migration legislations are key factors in the formation of bridled labor. Thus, our first step was to analyze existing regulatory frameworks under the lens of this conceptual framework. In addition to a literature review of specialized national literature on labor and migration legislation, we conducted archival work of legislative and case-law documents related to labor market and migration management.

Following the desk research phase, we conducted semi-structured interviews ( $N = 7$ ) with institutional (labor inspectorate officers) and societal actors (trade unions) directly or indirectly engaged with enforcement actions aiming to ensure compliance with labor and migratory law. Interviews were conducted in 2022. We followed the “key informant” qualitative method (Di Ruggiero *et al.*, 2014). In line with this approach, a purposive sampling approach was used where informants were selected according to their professional role and their ability to provide relevant insights about our research topic (Di Ruggiero *et al.*, 2014). For the labor inspectorate, we approached an officer from the national anti-fraud office of the Spanish Labor and Social Security Inspectorate (ITSS dir.), which coordinates the national inspection strategy in the digital delivery sector and two labor inspectorate officers working in the field. For the trade unions, we conducted four semi-structured interviews with labor union heads of secretariats or sections specialized in the platform economy or digital foot-delivery. After informed consent, each recorded interview lasted around one hour and half.

Then, ethnographic interviews ( $N = 25$ ) were conducted with riders over a two-year period (2021–2023) in three Spanish cities (Barcelona, Zaragoza and Benidorm) gathering recorded interview material of an average thirty minutes each. After conducting a series of urban ethnographic observations of riders’ itineraries and temporary gatherings within the downtown areas of those three cities, and following the ethnographic approach to interviews advanced in the classic work by Spradley (2016), we developed semi-structured questionnaires starting with an open-ended biographic query about “*how did you become a*

*courier? Why in the app-based food-delivery sector?”* Interviews were preluded by signed informed consent, guaranteeing total anonymity of as well as freedom to end the interview when requested by the informants, normally due to incoming food orders loudly beeping on their phones to which they needed to attend. The sampling strategy followed a snowball technique with those couriers willing to engage in our research project. Many interview took place during wait times between delivery orders. Our sample gathered testimonies from diverse profiles in terms of gender and citizenship status. Of the female and male riders, only two were born and raised in Spain, the rest having different foreign origins, mostly Latin America (e.g. Venezuela and Colombia) and some from West Africa (e.g. Senegal). The majority of interviewed riders were in different stages of their asylum applications. This percentage coincides with growing studies of platform labor as being predominantly of migrant background, and with precarious administrative statuses (van Doorn *et al.*, 2022; Zwysen and Piasna, 2024). Informants’ language abilities to conduct the interview were more than enough, since most of them spoke Spanish, and many spoke English or French.

#### 4. The case of digital food-delivery in Spain: regulations and law-in-practice

##### 4.1 Labor regulation in the food-delivery industry: the Riders’ Act and the limits of salarization

Platform labor is known for its hyper-flexibilization of work standards outside normalized labor relations. Policy debates in particular, such as those which surrounded the Rider Law, often emphasized how platform companies circumvent labor legislation in place, in that sense, emphasizing the “irregularity” of platform work. Companies operating outside national labor parameters however is a phenomenon that, in the Spanish and other national cases, precedes the irruption of digital platforms (Sanz de Miguel, 2019; Riesco-Sanz, 2020; Verd Pericás and Yepes, 2021). Although irregular forms of employment is a complex and multi-causal problem (Eurofound, 2016), literature has evidenced how its expansion since the 1980s responds largely to the fragmentation of forms of employment sanctioned in different deregulatory reforms (Act 32/1984 of August 2; Act 10/1994 of May 19). The promotion and diversification of alternative forms of subsistence and insertion into the labor world (temporary contracts, different statutory and extra-statutory scholarships, two different figures for self-employed, etc.) made the work of the labor inspectorate more complex and provided companies with different alternatives to circumvent labor legislation (Sanz de Miguel, 2019). This environment facilitated the multiplication of non-standard relations of labor allowing platform companies to adapt in diverse ways to local markets.

In this context, digital platforms found a favorable regulatory framework akin to labor flexibility to develop the use of novel algorithmic management technology tools leading to *de facto* labor law circumvention practices (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020). Although some studies had already warned of the multidimensional nature of labor fraud perpetrated by digital delivery platforms (UGT, 2020), political and trade union attention focused primarily on the figure of bogus self-employment. Thus, the legal battle of workers and unions in defense of the salaried nature of riders (Sanz de Miguel *et al.*, 2023) concluded with the landmark Supreme Court ruling of September 23, 2020, which established the labor – employee/employer – situation of the relationship between riders and the platforms, alluding to the control that the companies exercised in the organization of the work process, as well as the fact that they are the owners of the main assets necessary for the performance of the activity (the platform). This ruling led to the approval, in August 2021, of the so-called Riders’ Act, which established the legal presumption in favor of the employment relationship of workers in the sector.

As evidenced by Waeyaert *et al.* (2022), the Riders’ Law has had modest results in its objective to formalize the employment relationship in the sector. Since its implementation, the main platforms in the sector have developed three strategies to circumvent the new labor regulation. First, the largest platform in the sector (Glovo) has introduced changes in the billing functions of their app with a view to simulating the organizational autonomy of workers.



These changes, however, perpetuate the dependency relationship and continue to deprive workers of decision-making power over the workday or prices of work. Secondly, other platforms, such as Just Eat, have adapted to the salaried model, but by resorting to fictitious subcontracting that allows them to evade their corporate obligations and perpetrate various irregularities (hiring, working hours) in the context of a more fragmented workplace, while limiting the exercise of collective rights. Finally, platforms allow unregistered riders to enter in to the application and deliver under their company's name. This form of undeclared work is based on the sub-renting and/or sharing of delivery accounts. In other words, accounts that have been registered through the usual channels in the companies' applications are sub-rented and/or lent to third parties who, in most cases, lack the appropriate administrative documentation to be able to work and/or reside in Spain due to migration regulation ([Sanz de Miguel et al., 2023](#)). The increasingly permissive environment of labor regulation in which delivery platforms have inserted themselves has facilitated adaptations to work situations that go beyond labor relations.

#### 4.2 Migratory legislation and the production of bridled categories

Like many European countries, the reiterative objective of migration policy has been to adjust, regulate and use migratory flows according to the needs of the Spanish labor market, with the argument of protecting the national labor force ([López Sala and Godenau, 2017](#); [Sánchez Alonso, 2011](#)). Despite recent reforms (RD 629/2022; Order ISM/1302/2022, December 27) access to the labor market for the non-EU migrant population continues to be subject to a complex restrictive and selective system based on the initial granting of authorizations ([Rojo Torrecilla, 2023](#)).

Apart from the channels associated with a formal catalog of jobs that are difficult to cover, immigration regulations in Spain have also created exceptional categories authorized to reside and work in Spanish territory, albeit with significant restrictions. This is the particular case of applicants for temporary residence due to exceptional circumstances, which include: international protection (asylum); "labor, social or family attachment"; or authorizations in reward for collaboration with police or administrative authorities. The main difference between applicants for these authorizations, and those restricted from applying to permissions due to their passports (ending in the category of undocumented migrants), is that while their application is being processed, they are guaranteed the principle of non-refoulement and, after a certain period of time, the right to temporarily work, until their case is resolved. However, literature has shown that the restrictions placed on applicants for these exceptional authorizations equate them, in practice, to undocumented migrants, placing them in a *de facto* situation of semi-legality ([Moreno Amador, 2023](#)). This can be seen, for example, in the case of asylum seekers. Following the 2001 reform of the law on foreigners, asylum seekers are automatically authorized to work, without the need to carry out any additional procedures, six months after their application has been submitted and accepted for processing. However, in practice, their access to the labor market is very complicated for several reasons: lack of knowledge of this regulation on the part of potential employers; restrictions on length of contracts; or additional administrative difficulties that limit or complicate the formalization of an employment contract ([Moreno Amador, 2023](#)).

In these cases, we see how a series of administrative categories – such as the asylum seeker – grant some access to residence and to the labor market but with considerable limitations. These limitations can be *de jure* (contained in the legal texts that create and delimit that category) or *de facto* (as in the previous case where a company lacks sufficient knowledge about the legislation or where an individual has administrative difficulties to carry out everyday procedures such as renting an apartment or opening a bank account). We reiterate that the differential access to residence, employment or civic rights does not fall along a binary of documented/undocumented migration. Rather, there are a multiplicity of so-called "legal migrants" whose status in their current country of residence significantly constricts their rights and access.

This spectrum of categories creates subpopulations that are differentially exposed to shifts in labor relations. The case of asylum seekers is particularly important for our case, as the majority of riders engaged during the research fieldwork were at various stages of applying for international protection in Spain.

The regulatory framework regarding labor and migration provides the background and field upon which the development of platform business and the involvement of non-EU migrants interact. The next section explores how this develops in practice emphasizing the intersections between the two regulatory frameworks creating a joint context beyond the specific indications of either. Furthermore, we highlight how the specificities of platform company behavior and the survival strategies of different migrant riders play out in and contribute to this context. The relation is dynamic. It disfavors migrant riders' conditions, although simultaneously opening them a possibility to labor in a restrictive setup. It is precisely this "messy" dynamic that signals the need for further theorization to grasp such contradictory process.

#### *4.3 Practices of delivery: the case of Glovo in Spain*

Entering and getting stuck in delivery: On how short-term and shifting labor/residency permits inadvertently match platform delivery's contractual relations.

In line with current EU norms, migration management in Spain is framed within restrictive Schengen legislation which makes a sharp distinction between EU and non-EU ("extra-communitarian") citizens. People who hold passports from non-EU countries that are on the visa "negative-list" (van Houtum, 2010) find it difficult to enter, stay or work in EU-nation states legally. For these profiles, working as a rider is the only way to enter the labor market:

And that was the option for us . . . to work immediately . . . Since here in Spain, people who come from certain countries, are not given work visas, that was the only option in the city (Interview 9, Benidorm, May 2023. Rider from USA, female, expired tourist visa, rented Glovo account).

Delivery was the only realistic option. Agricultural work was available too, "but only after you accepted being yelled at, and you were able to work from sunrise to sunset, always under the threat of violence" (Interview 10, Barcelona, April 2022. Rider from Senegal, male, no residence or work permits, rented Glovo account).

However, this situation is not always so straightforward, as citizens of countries with limited visa access to Schengen space may encounter member state-specific exceptions. Spain makes exceptions for certain Latin American countries, with which there are asylum agreements for humanitarian reasons, fast-track processes to citizenship and other procedures of accelerating entry, residency and work permissions. For people finding themselves at this juncture, app-based delivery becomes "a solution" while their longer-term legal status is determined. Delivery appears as the "best" of the few options open for these people who are temporarily authorized to reside, albeit with significant restrictions on work. During the fieldwork, we encountered the repeated presence of asylum seekers in the delivery sector. The process of applying for asylum entails several stages until the asylum is either granted or denied, each stage with its limits and possibilities. When an asylum application is officially filed, one receives a "white card" which lasts for nine months. During the first six months with this card, the person is not allowed to legally work in Spanish territory. This period may be accompanied by the expectation of living in special homes for asylum seekers, with certain support, but without access to the labor market. The last 3 months of the white card, people are allowed to work. In a second period, while the application is being processed, the applicant receives a "red card" as personal identification. This card allows access to the labor market and should serve as valid identification for other basic services (renting housing, opening a bank account, obtaining a telephone number, etc.) that may be connected to successful incorporation into the labor market. But this permit only lasts for the time expected for the case to be resolved, not including delays. This temporary nature severely limits access to all kind of



contractual relations. In addition to these limitations, there is a general lack of awareness among employers, banks, landlords, etc. of this red card, which they may consider invalid. Although the red card guarantees certain rights, and it is not possible to be deported during the application period, in practice, access to the labor market for many asylum seekers resembles that of the undocumented population (Moreno Amador, 2023, pp. 122–144).

While other sectors did not regularly offer contracts to these asylum-seekers given the short-term nature of their work permits, platform companies were non-demanding in that regard. After all, they portray themselves as sites of flexible labor providing short-term and self-managed forms of employment. In fact, when exploring their recruitment protocols, we were able to gather how rather than a labor contract, the onboarding process is closer to an agreement for service provision. Conducted all online, without a prior job interview or any other conventional protocol for hiring, the signing of the contract is actually similar to the process of opening a Google account, based on registering with name and password. Prior to obtaining access to the delivery account, the applicant is asked for digital copies of two required documents: a) a personal identification card (national ID or passport); and a certificate of self-employment registration. The second requirement is linked to holding a work permit, therefore, it is only available for those legally allowed to labor in Spain. Still, since follow-up supervisions are largely absent, some asylum seekers are able to register during periods with granted labor permits. Even if the permission expires in a few months, the company is (blissfully unaware) of that change in administrative status, permitting initially registered riders to deliver under the company application. This un-rigorous labor recruitment as well as the subsequent lack of supervision during the labor process speaks to the highly permissive – and thus neglectful – practices of platform capitalist contractual relations. This laxity are captured by onboarding calls to register with the app (without using the term “contract”): “Connect to the app and deliver when you want! Ready to deliver? Just complete this registration form in our application.” (Glovo Application. Figure 1).

The couriers interviewed over a period of two years shifted migration status and thus, their access to residence and labor also changed. While at the beginning they were not able to open a delivery account, because they could not register as self-employed persons, toward the end of our fieldwork, many obtained the “red card” which allows them to register as self-employed and finally open a formal account in delivery apps. At the same time, it should be stated some riders lost their red card due to delayed asylum processing, or the rejection of their application.

The crossover between migration legislation (which promises to provide short-term work permits to those applying for international protection), and labor legislation (which has normalized flexible labor relations), leads to paradoxical situations. This is the case of several of our informants, most of them women with passports from Venezuela. As one of the countries whose citizens are granted the possibility of international protection or asylum on humanitarian grounds, applicants come with expectations to receive labor permits promptly. Usually, this is not the case, with long and undefined periods of time spent before the resolution of their asylum applications.:

While we wait for the resolution of our application, which initially is supposed to take six months but always gets delayed to over a year, we need to eat and survive, and the only two options available are live-in domestic help and platform delivery (Interview 11, Zaragoza, January 2022. Rider from Venezuela, female, asylum seeker, former Glovo rider).

During that waiting time, they borrow or rent account names and passwords from family, friends or ads on social media. In this way, app-based delivery has become an option for survival during those administrative limbo periods within the tempos of the border regime (Diz and Casas-Cortés, 2024). Historically, farmwork and domestic service have been two of the most prominent sectors of undeclared work in Spain, with a higher than average percentage of migrant labor force (Rocha, 2011). One way to escape these sectors known for their exploitative practices with little labor control because of their lack of public exposure – uninhabited fields, far from urban environments and private household spaces – is through



Figure 1. Glovo application. Source: Glovo website

platform delivery. The urban environment in which delivery takes place (shopping malls, tourist areas, city downtowns) makes it a safer option.

The effects of contractual flexibility and permissive enrollment system: sub-renting and sharing of user accounts.

In the case of newcomers without all the residence and work permits in place (such as those awaiting their red card), digital delivery work is presented as the quickest and most reasonable option to start making money and be able to cover immediate basic needs: “you start working, even without a job” (Interview 8, Zaragoza, February 2023. Rider from Venezuela, female, asylum seeker with “white card”, shared Glovo account).

The overwhelming presence of migrant riders in our study, and in particular those seeking international protection, seems to develop along several interrelated paths. The lack of a language requirement to enroll and conduct delivery work facilitates the entry of migrant labor into the sector. However, one of the main reasons explaining the ease of entering into this sector is the permissive enrollment system based on digital accounts. Instead of a regular labor contract, becoming a rider does not imply any in-person requirement: no interview, no signing, no office from which to get the necessary work-tools. “Hiring” and “firing” practices (in this case “onboarding” and “disconnection”) are all managed by companies’ digital applications. Individual accounts are designed to be easily accessible, and in turn, transferable among users. This technological ease and lack of monitoring on behalf of companies has led to the phenomenon of multi-user accounts, mainly through renting access to third-parties via informal agreements among riders. This form of labor is not a marginal occurrence but a spreading phenomenon, recurrently stated by our informants: “In Benidorm, everyone has a rented account.” (Interview 1, Benidorm, May 2023. Rider from Perú, male, no residence or work permits, rented Glovo account). These practices in the digital food-delivery sector of

Spain have already been documented, initially identified by national media outlets (e.g. Plaza 2018) [6], and later exposed in reports by national unions (e.g. UGT, 2020) and EU agencies (Fairwork, 2024). These reports point to a strong migrant presence, especially those with residence and/or employment restrictions. Thus, even for those individuals with restrictions on being able to sign up for their own account, the platform's structure and lack of oversight facilitate the exercise of multiple unregistered arrangements to facilitate the incorporation of new riders. If those individuals achieve a status which allows them to register their own account, they may eventually do so, and begin to rent out or share their own account in turn. Thus, the relationship between the ease of officially onboarding to the app, and unregistered practices of rider recruitment are mutually reinforcing and expanding the labor pool of deliverers for the platform. At the same time, these practices occur in a context where delivery is one of the few feasible options to make a living. Options are limited primarily due to administrative status. At the same time, a flexibilized labor environment allowing platforms to recruit without formal contracts, opens a venue otherwise closed to those with curtailed administrative access.

When responding to our open-ended question about their journey to delivery, our informants referred to the ease of becoming a rider:

Once I got the login name and password, I started to deliver. I bought the isothermal bag and scooter second-hand, also online. (Interview 2 Zaragoza, June 2022. Rider from Venezuela, female, asylum-seeker, shared Glovo account).

My brother who had just arrived in Spain, called me in Caracas to give me the main info of his Glovo account so I could start delivering as soon as I got to the airport (Interview 3 Zaragoza, February 2022. Rider from Venezuela, male, asylum seeker, shared Glovo account).

The existence and growing practice of account-renting and sharing is supported by testimonies compiled among institutional actors, such as labor inspectors and union representatives confirming the persistence of this phenomenon after the implementation of the Riders' Act:

We are aware that the platforms continue to sub-rent licenses and authorizations to provide services in this underground economy (...) The problem in these cases is to identify them ... There is no work center, they do not appear in any fiscal or accounting documentation of the company, so ... the documents we request, in principle, do not appear. (Interview 5, Inspector/a provincial ITSS 11/05/2022).

The issue of sub-renting has not changed after the Riders' Act ... (...) So, this system allows people who do not have a work permit to access or work through these applications or digital platforms (Interview 6, Comisiones Obreras Cataluña. Secretaría Nuevas Realidades del Trabajo 11/03/2022).

Representatives of labor inspectorates and national trade unions agree that the platforms are aware of multi-user accounts. According to these stakeholders, the platforms' digital applications allow the practice of multi-user accounts without taking rigorous and regular identity control measures. Such permissiveness on the part of companies is accompanied by sporadic interventions conveying an image of concern and effort to be taking measures. This happened when the "black market of delivery accounts" appeared in the news (Allievi, 2022/ El Pais). One of the main measures was the implementation of Facial Recognition Systems. Still, according to the users, this surveillance device (associated with border and bank security) is implemented in such a way that is easily surmountable:

Glovo's application can request selfies at any point during delivery, so a mismatch is likely between the owner's original picture and the actual user's selfie. Still, once the application indicates a failure, it only closes the account temporarily. It immediately invites you to write [a message] explaining the reasons behind this mis-match received by a non-automated response. There is an actual person that actually fixes it for you. This technician must have orders to solve the issue behind the algorithmic calculus of unsuccessful facial recognition because, in most cases, the problem is rectified and you start delivering again, on the same day or in 24h (Interview 7, Zaragoza June 2023. Rider from Venezuela, female, asylum seeker with "red card", shared Glovo account)

According to our fieldwork, to sub-rent an account in Spain, the owner is normally paid 30% of the proceeds, and it is usually done between strangers. There are cases where an account is shared among several riders, of which only one is the owner, while the others who use it do not give a percentage in return, but this is mostly done between family and friends:

My husband's friend shared his account with both of us, that's how my husband and I decided to come to Spain, because we had a Glovo account waiting for us. It wasn't under our names, but we could use it to carry out deliveries (Interview 8, Zaragoza, May 2022. Rider from Venezuela, asylum seeker).

For people without the required work permits, sharing delivery accounts provides quick access to ways of making money (not employment) as soon as they arrive. The ease of onboarding in delivery allows people to access a temporary means of living, which, in many cases, lasts longer than expected. This quick onboarding, combined with limited access to the national labor market creates a situation in which platform labor becomes necessary, even appealing:

Glovo gave me everything. When I first arrived, I was able to get money, and when I got my red card, I was able to deliver with my own account, with permission to reside and work, without trouble from police stops. Moreover, I was able to bring my cousin and his friends over, sharing my login coordinates. (Interview 13, Zaragoza, April 2023. Rider from Brazil, male, red card, own Glovo account).

However, while attractive at first, platform labor can eventually bridle riders due to those very same limitations and possibilities. Delivery is somehow portrayed as an incomplete venue to find a sustainable way to reside in a different country, providing access to just-in-time yet low-income opportunities, as well as a way to help family and friends. Platform flexibility and permissiveness allows quick entry into a means of subsistence while their migratory case is pending. The limited status forces them to remain in delivery. That is, while they are waiting for the border's temporality of processing paperwork, they are stuck in delivery. According to statistics, most asylum applications are delayed for more than six months, and most cases are in fact denied ([Moreno Amador, 2023](#), pp. 124–126). Those people whose cases are delayed are likely to remain in the undeclared delivery sector, pending the overdue resolution of their case. Those whose cases are denied become *irregularized*, promptly put under the category of “undocumented migrant”, even though they hold passports or other ID cards. While they are not allowed to reside or work, delivery remains as an even more vital form of survival. This creates situations of path dependency on undeclared forms of delivery, which in turn provide otherwise inaccessible (though constrained) opportunities, such as limited income-earning and a certain urban safety net.

## 5. Conclusion: platform bridled labor

Our study shows how the interplay among the regulatory frameworks of labor and migration binds those with incomplete administrative status to non-standard and often undeclared forms of labor in delivery platforms in Spain. By focusing on the most prominent company in the platform delivery sector in Spain after the implementation of the Riders' Act, our research unveils how current platform delivery configurations attract migrant laborers as one of the few options available to them. Only on rare occasions during our two-year fieldwork, were we able to confirm the presence of national citizens delivering for Glovo. In fact, during our research period, most interviewees and their networks either did not have the necessary paperwork to reside or work, were in the process of applying for asylum or were shifting between these two categories. The current migration regime, with its multiple migration categories and their respective temporary permits to reside and work, productively articulates with account-based forms of enrollment facilitated by digital platform infrastructures. While enabling the entry into labor markets, this contingent entanglement between a regime of platform labor flexibility and a selective regime of migration management facilitates the external disciplining of riders, who render themselves available to deliver 24/7 under any circumstance. That is, this

legislative overlapping provokes an increasingly international workforce to be “bridled” to platform delivery, turning out to be quite profitable for platform companies. The difficulties of people with precarious migratory status to enter regular labor contract relations work as a further incentive to their insertion in gig-type labor and sectors marked by *informalized* labor relations. In this regard, delivery platforms are able to capture and articulate this informality and use it to the advantage of their business model. Informality then is not only a means of survival for individuals but also a specific area of market penetration. In this manner, platform capitalism, informality and migration status intersect creating the existing platform economy in Spain.

Thinking through these empirical observations about migrant labor getting entrapped in delivery, we offer a preliminary conceptualization of migrant delivery work as “platform bridled labor”. “Platform bridled labor” refers to how current configurations of platform delivery heavily rely upon a mobile force with restrictions on labor and residency, which in turn, gets bridled to the app-based delivery sector for an unclear amount of time. In our case, these are couriers delivering for Glovo with temporary and shifting precarious migratory statuses, mainly those in the midst of asylum processes with changing levels of access to residence and employment. Thus, the theoretical import of bridled labor is not only the metaphor of a bridle, rather the theoretical rethinking of confining conditions as a long-term process of markets and states interacting with human mobilities. Adopting Moulier-Boutang’s notion of bridled labor allows for a productive interpretation of such a paradoxical situation: flexible markets under restrictive migration management lead to forms of undeclared labor, attracting and confining recently arrived people with incomplete migratory paperwork. This is due to the entanglement of regulatory frameworks and the actions of stakeholders. Without blaming one side for the resulting situation – mean-minded companies nor self-exploiting migrants – it is possible to identify how the two parties benefit, though in unequal ways, from this unresolved predicament. This conjuncture of how migrant labor is bridled in the platform economy is not an exception though. It is a renewed expression of the historical recurrence of similar exploitation dynamics of “exceptional” work arrangements, and the development of contingent and precarious labor with a strong migrant presence in different economies. As Andersen and Spanger (2024) state “platforms add a new layer to this history as they transform and formalize certain aspects of how mobile and contingent labour is organized, managed and controlled” (2024, p. 3738).

This conceptual interpretation of confining conditions necessarily expands predominant labor-centered analysis and labor-related solutions, signaling distinct venues for policy attempts to regulate the platform delivery sector. Thus far, the key solution to the increasingly precarious conditions and growing irregularities detected in platform labor has been the re-classification of worker status from self-employment toward a standard employment relationship, as in Spain’s Rider Act or the EU’s Platform Labor Directive. Nonetheless, our research shows how this solution is limited in its scope, assuming platform laborers under a citizen-worker paradigm when the app-based delivery has become dependent on international laborers, usually under administrative restrictions. In light of the permissive and neglectful labor patterns in use by platform capitalism, our research calls not only for updating labor regulations to deal with technical innovations and the ongoing reconfiguration of work temporalities and spatialities. Rather, the social and policy recommendations of this empirical research include thorough attention to the sphere of migratory regulations in relation to the labor market.

Short-term, reachable implications include a necessary bureaucratic shift toward streamlining procedures in the formal process of obtaining permission to reside and work. In tandem, it is key to facilitate information to employers about the permission to work associated with different documentation (white card, red card, etc.) and how they evolve in sequential stages marked by specific allocated permissions. Nonetheless, the most important social and policy implication of this research is of paradigmatic nature and requires more time and further institutional restructuring. We contend that attempts at regulating platform

labor – and by extension, the growing phenomenon of informal labor – will function if, and only if, there is a comprehensive reformulation of current migration regulations embracing a horizon toward proposals of freedom of movement for all.

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### Notes

1. In this article, we refer to the concept of undeclared work, which, as noted by Williams (2019), is characterized by what it lacks or falls short of compared to declared work. The general agreement among scholars and policymakers is it involves paid work which is not reported or not declared to the authorities for tax, social security and/or labor law compliance when it should be (Williams, 2019).
2. In this piece, we use the Spanish translation of Moulier-Boutang's book translated in 2006. No translation currently exists in English. All quotations have been translated into English by the authors.
3. This includes special issues dedicated entirely to exploring this intersection (see E&P-A 2024).
4. The arguments about entrapment, stickiness, confinement and the more nuanced argument about bridled labor are not meant to exclude the relevance of agency exercised on the part of platform participants (migrant or otherwise). Our aim in this paper is to underscore how migration regulation and labor market developments produce intertwining results that impact mobile populations in specific ways.
5. R&D&I project with code PID2020-115170RB-100 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/ and directed by researcher Ramón y Cajal, Grant RYC 2018-024990-I funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/and the European Social Fund "ESF invests in your future".
6. [https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/2018-06-26/glovo-repartidores-inmigrantes-licencias-opiniones\\_1582451/academic-publications](https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/2018-06-26/glovo-repartidores-inmigrantes-licencias-opiniones_1582451/academic-publications).
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### Corresponding author

Pablo Sanz de Miguel can be contacted at: [p.sanz@unizar.es](mailto:p.sanz@unizar.es)