

Unpaid labour in online freelancing platforms: between marketization strategies and self- employment regulation ¹

Abstract

Sociology scholars have shown that unpaid labour is widespread in digital labour platform work, yet no study has shed light on the mechanisms generating unpaid work in the digital platform sector. This paper aims to fill this gap and points to the mechanisms produced at the interface between platforms' marketization strategies and the regulation of self-employment in national contexts to explain the way in which unpaid labour unfolds in online freelancing platform work. We base our argument on an empirical study that investigates work in four different online freelancing platforms and in four European countries, namely Italy, France, Belgium and Poland.

Key words: online platforms, unpaid labour, freelancing, self-employment, marketization.

Abstract italiano

Studi sociologici hanno dimostrato che il lavoro gratuito è diffuso nel lavoro su piattaforme digitali, ma nessuno studio ha finora fatto luce sui meccanismi che inducono la produzione di lavoro gratuito nel settore del lavoro di piattaforma. Pertanto, il seguente articolo mira a colmare questa lacuna e lo fa svelando i meccanismi, nati dall'intersezione tra le strategie di commercializzazione delle piattaforme e la regolamentazione del lavoro autonomo nei contesti nazionali, che spiegano il modo in cui il lavoro gratuito viene prodotto sulle piattaforme di online freelancing. La nostra argomentazione è basata su uno studio empirico che indaga il lavoro in quattro diverse piattaforme di online freelancing e in quattro paesi europei, ovvero Italia, Francia, Belgio e Polonia.

Parole chiave: piattaforme online, lavoro gratuito, freelance, lavoro autonomo, commercializzazione.

¹ This research has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Research Project ResPecTMe - Grant Agreement number 833577) and from Flemish Research Council FWO (Grant/Award Number: G073919N).

Introduction

Traditionally associated with the female-dominated realm of socially reproductive work (Duffy, 2007), unpaid labour has progressively made its way in research investigating paid employment (Baines & Armstrong, 2019; Pulignano, 2019), coming to be defined as «a worker's time or effort outside the fixed hours and hourly rates of a standard employment relationship» (Pulignano and Morgan, 2021). As unpaid work has gained increasing importance in granting and maintaining access to paid employment, also in the new sector of the digital platform economy (Berg et al., 2018; Casilli & Posada, 2019), researchers have called for focusing on unpaid work given its important implications for the quality of jobs, working conditions and employment relations (Moore & Newsome, 2018; Pulignano et al. 2021).

Unpaid labour often results from organisational changes that aim to boost price-based competition through service and employment marketization (Greer & Doellgast, 2017), and it is buttressed by shifts in regulation of labour markets that make work increasingly disconnected from a permanent income under a full-time and permanent job (Bosch, 2004; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018). Especially, studies have emphasised that the growing use of self-employment as a way to smooth the “indeterminacies” of waged labour results in transferring risks to workers (Supiot, 2001), who now have to carry out numerous tasks at their own expenses (Moore & Newsome, 2018, p. 485). This is particularly the case in the digital platform economy, where researchers have revealed the existence of much unpaid work carried out by self-employed workers on labour platforms and digital companies without a corresponding form of remuneration (Casilli & Posada, 2019; Gray & Suri, 2019; Terranova, 2000). A host of research has demystified platform management's claims of acting as mere intermediaries between demand (clients) and offer (own-account workers), and proven that labour platforms actually control and direct workers' actions while curtailing their autonomy through algorithmic managerial systems constructed on digital technologies (Gandini, 2019; Meijerink et al., 2020; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). Yet, to date, no knowledge has shed light on the mechanisms that generate unpaid labour in the platform economy and we argue that not recognising them risks to omit key features of this new mode of work and of worker's actual position and activity in the labour market. Therefore, this paper endeavours to unravel the mechanisms that prompt the production of unpaid labour in paid platform work, and we do so by studying four online freelancing platforms in four European countries. We show that the way platforms establish marketization strategies by organizing competition

among freelancers on platform is crucial in the generation of unpaid, and we also evidence how national regulations, in particular with regard to self-employment statuses, are consequential in creating a “congenial environment” (Thelen, 2018) that enables freelancers to comply with the competition logics fostered by platforms.

The paper is structured as follows. We first discuss the theoretical framework and the debates in which we locate our study. We later present our research design and methodology and then proceed to illustrate our findings and draw analytical comparisons across the platform models and different institutional settings. Finally, we discuss the findings and conclude.

Unpaid labour and the digital platform economy

A tradition of studies from sociology, social critical philosophy and economics call “shadow work” a growing amount of economic and social actions that lie in the penumbra beneath, and around, paid forms of work (see Illich, 1981). Daniels (1987) has introduced the concept of “invisible work” and described its nature and evolution with particular reference to the distinction between public and private activity, particularly with regard to women work in the domestic sphere. On a similar note, Star and Strauss (1999) name “silent work” the labour that is taken for granted and made invisible through routine practices. In more recent years, researchers have drawn attention to the growing relevance of unpaid work in paid employment, stressing the degrading effects this has on working conditions (Baines & Armstrong, 2019; Crain et al. , 2016; Macdonald et al., 2018; Moore & Newsome, 2018). Thereby, in this paper we define unpaid labour in paid employment as «a worker’s time or effort outside the fixed hours and hourly rates of a standard employment relationship» (Pulignano and Morgan, 2021).

In particular, Crain et al. (2016) have found that invisible labour is likely to be more prevalent where jobs are more flexible and fragmented with their parts becoming progressively dispersed and hard to see (hence, invisible). Job flexibilization is often ascribed to the marketization of services and employment, which Greer and Doellegast (2017) define as «the imposition or intensification of price-based competition at the level of transaction» in which «exchanges are frequent and open to a wide range of participants» (Ibid., p. 195). Marketization is primarily the result of changing models of work organization but is also significantly flanked by liberalizations and deregulatory trends disposed by national institutions (Greer & Doellegast,

2017; Pulignano, 2019). A large tradition of research in comparative political economy and employment relations points to the importance of national institutions and welfare systems in mediating company policies and leading to diverse outcomes in terms of working conditions (Benassi et al., 2019; Hassel & Sieker, 2022; Pulignano et al., 2016; Streeck, 2016; Thelen, 2012). Pulignano et al. (2022) investigate when and how institutions can represent the bases for employers strategies of accumulation; on a similar note, Hassel and Sieker (2022) show how different national employment regulations can accommodate or constrain companies liberalizing contracting models, generating different outcomes in terms of working conditions.

In line with this strand of research, Moore and Newsome (2018) offer an empirical example when they shows how unpaid labour unfolds in the parcel delivery sector through the use of institutionally-promoted self-employment (in replacement of standard employment); the combination of piece-rate payment, possible under this employment status, with the permanence of tight control over the labour process allows to strip all organizational and fringe efforts out of paid activities while offloading it onto workers, resulting in deep intensification of the work pace with much of it being unpaid. On a similar note, in the care sector, “cash-for-care” schemes cause care work to shift from public organizational to more diverse settings, including private households, with the generation of a mix of paid and unpaid work. Here, unpaid labour can involve both the tight control of working time (Rubery et al., 2016) – e.g. travelling between different clients’ locations (Macdonald and Charlesworth, 2016; McCann, 2016) for employed (formal) caregivers – and the re-familiarization of work by domestic (informal) caregivers (Simonazzi, 2009).

In the digital platform sector, “invisible” and unpaid labour has been evidenced in numerous researches (Casilli & Posada, 2019; Gray & Suri, 2019; International Labour Office, 2021; Pulignano et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020). Already in the early developments of digitalization, scholars pointed to the heavy reliance on “free labour” of these new online work models (Terranova, 2000). Casilli and Posada (2019) argue that a range of precarious working conditions spanning forms of underpaid, unpaid and micro-paid activities are produced in platform work as a result of non-standard work arrangements that are widespread in this sector. Indeed, institutionalist accounts highlight that platform work does not occur in institutional void and point to platforms’ capacity to pressure governments into adopting laissez-faire policies (Leighton, 2016) or even implementing de-regulatory responses to create a “congenial environment” (Thelen, 2018) that fosters employment marketization in line with platforms’ flexible organization of

production (Pulignano & van Lancker, 2021). On the other hand, the alleged autonomy of self-employed workers on platforms has been demystified by studies revealing the systems of control that platforms employ to govern and direct workers actions, thereby curtailing their independence (for example, see Gandini, 2019; Rosenblat, 2018; Veen et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019). In the complex interplay between platforms marketization strategies and non-standard forms of employment (i.e. self-employment) we find room for investigating the mechanisms that lead to the emergence of unpaid labour in digital platform work.

We focus on online freelancing platforms that match clients and self-employed workers for the performance of professional services. Scholars have acknowledged that online freelancing platforms represent a «distinct form of organization» (Wood et al., 2018) because they create «new opportunities to access and compete in global job markets, from anywhere at any time, as long as they [freelancers] have a computer and Internet access» (Kuek et al., 2015, p. 7). The allocation of labour on online freelancing platforms can transcend national frontiers and build truly globalized markets (Leung et al., 2021) that are flooded with an oversupply of labour that fuels price competition (i.e. marketization) with the consequence of compressing tariffs into downward spirals (Haidar & Keune, 2021). Platforms do so by deploying algorithmic HRM practices that hinge on automated match-making procedures between demand (clients) and offer (freelancers) (Jarrahi et al., 2020) and on performance measurement systems “disciplining” freelancers’ access to work (Benson et al., 2020; Meijerink et al., 2020; Pulignano et al., forthcoming), which propagates «the market logic and, specifically, the free and unregulated competition among self-employed gig workers» (Meijerink et al., 2020, p. 8). Understanding how competition is modelled on online platforms and the institutional arrangements, i.e. self-employment regulations, that sustain it is therefore of utmost importance to identify the emergence of unpaid labour in the sector. Hence, to this investigation we now turn.

Research design and methodology

To find what mechanisms generate unpaid labour in online freelancing platforms in Belgium, France, Italy and Poland, we followed critical realist philosophy of science (Bhaskar, 2010) to identify the “generative mechanisms” leading to observed and experienced patterns and to specify the conditions under which the former occur. Critical realists assume that

social groups are held to be produced and reproduced by social relationships as people go about their daily activities (Sayer, 1992). It also recognizes that this happens within different contexts, and at different levels. Whereby, various theories, concepts and perspectives can be used to explain variation (or not) in social outcomes while exploring and theorizing the relationships between the organizational and institutional contexts and the subjective experiences of work (Vincent et al., 2020, p. 462-466).

Our analysis is primarily based on biographical narrative interviews with online freelancing platform workers operating in Belgium, France, Italy and Poland. Biographical interviews (Schütze, 2008) enable in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of unpaid work in online freelancing labour. Life-biographies allow to capture dimensions of unpaid labour someone could have experienced by shedding light on the longitudinal evolution and differences in someone's life and work trajectories.

To account for variation within the online freelancing platform sector and across countries, we adopted a purposive sampling strategy. Our platform selection was built on the spatial dispersion of work (i.e. on-location vs. remote) and skills and complexity of the work (i.e. lower skill vs. higher skill) (see Vallas, 2019) and, as illustrated in Table 1, we targeted online freelancing work (i.e. higher skill, remote) occurring across (Upwork) and within countries (Malt, AddLance and Jellow). We selected countries on the basis of a mix of selecting-to-similarity and selecting-to-differences approach. Similarity was ensured around the level of penetration of the chosen sector of platform work in the countries, while we made sure that differences existed along institutional dimensions pertaining, in particular, to the national regulation of self-employment and independent work status.

Respondents were selected as to gather a sample that was as diverse as possible in terms of gender, age, educational level and migration background. A total of 63 biographical narrative interviews were conducted with platform workers in the online freelancing sector (Table 1). Furthermore, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with platforms management, trade unionists, and experts. Desk research was performed throughout the whole period of data collection and analysis, especially as preparatory work with regard to platforms' operations and institutional settings. Fieldwork was conducted between April 2020 and June 2021.

These qualitative data were coded line-by-line, first through open coding and later followed by selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The NVivo12 Software was used to carry out all analytical steps of the biographical narrative interviews and the semi-structured interviews.

Table 1. Platform and country selection

	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Poland</i>	<i>Tot. workers interviews</i>	<i>Tot. experts interviews</i>
<i>Online freelancing platforms</i>	Upwork Jellow	Upwork Malt	Upwork AddLance	Upwork	63	11

Selected platforms functioning

We select four platforms in the online freelancing platform sector, namely Upwork, Malt, AddLance and Jellow. The platforms selected vary according to the algorithmic management models they deploy to organize freelancers' access to work and competition; these models encompass a combination of «algorithmic features and related functions» (Jarrahi et al., 2020, p. 154) that range from the way they organize the matching between demand and offer and how they frame workers experience in the competition with their peers. On Upwork and Malt, clients can select freelancers from large pools where each freelancer has a “score” that the platform calculates on the basis of their performance and on clients' evaluations. Scores are proxies for workers experience and their tariffs are generally proportional to them. They serve the purpose of guiding clients through their selection, be it by directly choosing freelancers on directory lists or among the applications for jobs posted by the client. On AddLance and Jellow, no platform-embedded scoring systems exists. Yet, major differences exist between the two platforms. On AddLance, clients can only be matched with workers by posting a job offer to which freelancers respond with a budget proposal; in the application process, freelancers can uniquely rely on the scant experience information they can show on their profile (which allows for no connection to external CV) and on the budget they offer. Conversely, Jellow allows clients to peruse lists of freelancers and make a selection on the basis of rich profiles where freelancers can extensively display their work experience.

Self-employment in the selected countries

Despite a common long-term institutional trend towards boosting flexible employment and self-employment, the four countries analysed present differences in the way they regulate self-employment and independent work. Self-employed in Belgium is exempt from taxation up to 25.000€ per year but the self-employed have to subscribe to social contributions that amount to 20,5% of previous-year earnings and pay in accordance to the trimestral rate disposed by national authorities. In Italy, regular self-employment, which is subject to 15% income tax up to 25.000€ and biannual social contributions payments (around 25%) that are calculated on earnings from the previous year, is complemented with the “independent casual work” regime (*contratto di prestazione occasionale di lavoro autonomo*) that allows citizens to perform own-account work with minimum fiscal imposition (20%) and no social contributions to be paid for earnings up to 5,000 EUR per year, and raising to 6,666 EUR for specific categories such as retirees, students below the age of 26, and recipients of income support benefits. In France, self-employed (i.e. *auto-entrepreneurs*) are exempt from taxation but they pay social contribution directly to the national welfare institute. Differently from Belgium and Italy, in France social contributions rates are calculated upon effective current earnings, facilitating payments in times of low income. Moreover, under the so-called “ACRE system”, starters can benefit from a reduced rate of social contributions (11%) for the first 3 trimesters. Finally, in Poland, self-employed workers pay a flat 19% of taxation and are waived for the first year from paying social security contributions. Importantly, Poles can work as independent through civil law contracts that can be distinguished in two categories: contracts “for mandate” that do not require the specification of a particular outcome, and contracts to perform “specific tasks” where the outcome is spelled out (Lewandowski and Magda, 2017). The latter are particularly appealing because they benefit from low taxation wedges and are also exempt from social security contribution schemes.

Findings

Upwork and Malt

Freelancers’ access to work on platforms like Malt and Upwork greatly depends upon the platform score each worker possesses, on the basis of which they are set in a «direct and immediate competition logic» (Max, Malt FR). Score systems on both platforms lock freelancers in. Freelancer’s score

has a twofold function on these platforms: first, it contributes to determine the worker position in the search lists that clients peruse, and second, it represents worker's main ID in the platform internal market. As scores can only be built on the platform and grow with the number of missions (jobs) accomplished there, workers who walk their first steps on the platform – regardless of their offline experience, which has little influence on the platform score – have to compete from a very low power position which leaves «minimum space of negotiation from the side of the freelancer» as clients can «ask the impossible to freelancers» (Paulo, Upwork FR) to the point that while they're building reputation, workers are «afraid of refusing to carry out tasks for free [...] so I worked quite a lot for free» (Namita, Upwork FR). As scores, and the reviews of clients which account for a significant share of the total score, are so fundamental for entering competition (i.e. tight marketization), workers put up with a host of unpaid work such as when they accept «some tasks that are ridiculously low price, where clients say: if you do this, I will give you five stars [...] or they say “I can't pay much, but I promise I will leave you with good feedback”» (Paulo, Upwork, FR). Yet, unpaid labour in the form of severe disproportion of payment for the tasks carried out is not solely confined to the early stages of a freelancer's career on Upwork and Malt. Success scores are volatile and freelancers have to strive to keep them up. To this aim, securing missions is the first and foremost requirement, and this can only be done by «trying to outrun each other in the sense of “who gives for less”» (Matylda, Upwork PL), which in practice results in «working 70 hours a week» for «only a minimum wage» (Pierre, Malt FR) because to increase the odds of being selected and re-selected «we tell ourselves that we can have a chance, so we work and do all this unpaid stuff to start with [...] and at the end we make an invoice» (Pierre, Malt FR) that does not remotely account for all the time spent on the project. On a similar note, unpaid work also comes from workers aiming to keep the clients happy and get positive feedback, especially if they are returning clients: «sometimes clients take advantage of this [review system]. They know you need that positive feedback. So you feel compelled to sometimes don't charge it, don't charge them more when they ask for extra work, and do exactly what they asked you» (Paulo, Upwork FR). Moreover, the threat of a bad review can put, at all stages of a career on the platform, such pressure on freelancers that they agree to deliver entire project to a pronouncedly reduced price, such as in the case of Milena on Malt: «She [the client] told me there was a big problem with my translation, that it was very bad [...] so I proposed to only be paid half of what agreed, so 800 EUR

instead of 1,600 EUR» to avoid a negative review that would have crushed her profile on the platform (Milena, Malt FR).

The score freelancers build on platforms does not solely rely on clients' reviews and numbers of missions accomplished, but also on «other parameters to which you have to pay the greatest attention such as the rapidity of replying» to job openings and clients requests (Ludovica, Upwork IT). This prompts workers to «respond to the various positions in a very proactive way» (Jessica, Upwork IT) because, as Fanny vividly recounts: «[the platform is] going to show my average time of reply, and that average time of reply becomes a criteria [to select me or not]. So then, obviously, I get class requests on Sunday at 23:00 PM, on Saturday at 6:00 AM. That is terrible, because then if we lower that time of reply, the algorithm likes us less and puts us less in the front» (Fanny, Malt FR). In other words, to keep scores high, stay competitive and secure access to work and income, freelancers on Malt and Upwork surrender to being constantly on-call also during unsocial hours – while not being paid for it. Max reports how this platform functionality produces a feeling of «being taken into a spiral, into a whirl» where you «feel stressed because I know it [the job proposal] needs to be responded» also if you receive it «on a Friday evening at 7:00 PM while you're making dinner for your family» and you have no certainty of having a monetary return on this invested time (Max, Malt FR).

The strategy of tight marketization established by platforms like Upwork and Malt finds fertile terrain in countries with de-regulated self-employment systems. The case of French freelancers on Malt is telling. The self-employment regulation (*statut d'autoentrepreneur*) introduced in France in 2009 and aimed at giving a major boost to solo independent work, offers substantial fiscal discounts for low and medium earnings and payments of social security contributions are designed to be «a proportional share of what you earn, so if you earn zero, you pay zero» and, additionally, «when you start as a self-employed, there's a tool called the “ACRE Tool”, where you benefit for the first year of zero taxation and it increases little by little. The system is interesting compared, say, to Spain, where as a self-employed you need to pay 250 euros per month of social contributions, whether you make money or not!» (Marisol, Malt FR). Exemptions and fiscal facilitations on self-employment combine with platform's marketization strategy in producing a “beat down the price” mechanism that induces freelancers to compress their budgets to stay competitive, while forcing them to carry out a large amount of unpaid labour.

This “beat down the price” mechanism proves even fiercer on a platform like Upwork that stretches across international borders such as Upwork,

where freelancers' attempt to compete often entails to exploit cross-national institutional differences in relation to the regulation of self-employment. Although Upwork does not require freelancers to be officially registered as self-employed in their national and local jurisdictions as a condition for recruitment, those who are official freelancers, and on this account need to charge relatively high rates to cover their national social contributions, are often disadvantaged when competing with those who can afford asking for lower rates because they pay less or no social contributions in their home country. This implies that competition occurs by exploiting cross-national regulatory differences in relation to pay: «In Portugal I could just sign up, I could do it without papers, but here in France I cannot and it is challenging since they are always people cheaper than you on the market» (Paulo, Upwork FR); another example is between a Belgian freelancer who as such «is bound to pay high fixed social contributions» (Claire, Upwork BE) on a three-months basis and calculated on previous year earnings, and a Polish freelancer who «can re-open business [as an independent] and be once again entitled to paying reduced social security contributions» or, even more simply, just «keep working under a contract for a specific task» which does not entail any taxation nor social security payment (Anita, Upwork PL). Indeed, while the Polish context offers interesting opportunities for freelancers who can perform work on platform by using fiscally advantageous civil law contracts, the Belgian self-employment status is comparatively more regulated and, on this account, more expensive for freelancers.

It should be noted that the complex scoring systems embedded in Upwork and Malt make worker earnings further shrink as a consequence of the proportional fee (ranging between 20% and 5%) that freelancers pay to the platform on each compensation, which the clients transfer to freelancers via the internal monetary transaction system (so called “Escrow system”). As the score on platforms is tightly dependent upon the missions accomplished and paid through the platform, this forces workers to remain on the platform and agree to this form of taxation, which they generally report as being «frustrating to see a further 20% of your revenue disappear» (Anita, Upwork PL).

AddLance

Differently from Upwork and Malt, AddLance does not establish a complex internal score system. Although clients can leave reviews to the

freelancers they hire, this functionality is not as extensively used as on the other platforms. «You need to ask clients so many, many times to give you a review online» (Marta, AddLance IT) that many freelancers often go without any clients' assessment. One reason for that is that AddLance is organized to only act as match-maker, without exerting control on further interactions between clients and freelancers, there included the payment transaction; as a consequence, after the client has made a decision on the freelancer to select, the work relation is taken outside the platform, leaving little incentive for clients to get back in and evaluate the freelancer's work. This inefficiency in the review system contributes to decreasing the negotiating power of freelancers when competing for jobs. Indeed, the platform is organized in a way that neither clients nor workers can scroll through lists of freelancers profiles (as it is common in most other platforms), and freelancers' only way to find work on the platform is by applying for jobs posted by clients; yet, when clients receive applications for the job they posted, their selection cannot be guided by workers success scores as on Upwork and Malt, nor can they rely on rich profiles that signal freelancers work experience (as it happens on Jellow), given that «on your profile [on AddLance], you cannot link to other external contents such as to your personal website or Instagram, so your profile on AddLance is your only “shop window”» (Angelo, AddLance IT). Then, tariffs are left as main signpost of competition. Moreover, as platform currency is «needed to apply for jobs that are interesting for you» (Ugo, AddLance IT) and the sum to be spent to file a job application is relatively high, ranging «between 2 EUR and 8 EUR» (Marta, AddLance IT), workers are induced to further push down tariffs to maximize chances of having a return on their investment (the currency paid). These platform functionalities induce freelancers to squeeze prices and offer their service for «very, very low budget» (Nadia, AddLance IT) to increase their chances of being selected (i.e. sheer marketization), knowing that those sums will hardly cover the real amount of work to be performed, leaving much of the work on the project unpaid.

As Marta, among other AddLance freelancers, reported: «AddLance taught me that competition is unfair » (Marta, AddLance IT), pointing to the availability within the same country of fiscally advantageous self-employment regulations in coexistence with regular, and more “costly” self-employment regime. As Ugo claims, these differences in self-employment regimes offer competitive advantages to workers who are not registered as official freelancers «because since they don't have VAT to pay, they can ask lower prices» (Ugo, AddLance IT). On AddLance, the client is expressly requested to choose what sort of freelancers they want to opt for (in terms of

work status) and «I recorded the percentages of job posts that were open to everyone (67%), those who were only for registered freelancers with a VAT number (14%) and those that just did not say (18%). So, basically, jobs are open to all categories of workers, regardless of official status and this is very problematic because those who do not have a VAT regime can compete on an advantageous ground vis-à-vis “real freelancers”» (Ugo, AddLance IT). On a similar note, Nadia acknowledges that her capacity to afford being paid «35 EUR for a voice-over project» is due to the fact that she is still under the “independent casual work” regime on which she pays no charges nor social contributions, but once she’ll reach the plateau of 5,000 EUR «I’ll have to start paying for the INPS [i.e. social contributions]» and these tariffs won’t be viable any longer (Nadia, AddLance IT).

In other words, in the case of AddLance in Italy, the strategy of “sheer marketization” established by the platform successfully rests upon the loopholes generated by the existence within the country’s institutional context of different forms of more-or-less deregulated self-employment statuses; here too, the combination of platform competition model and institutional setting triggers a “beat down the price” mechanism among freelancers who perform much unpaid work as a consequence of the compression of their prices.

Jellow

A very different experience of on-platform price competition is told by Belgian freelancers active on Jellow. The platform does not impose score systems but allows freelancers to be reviewed by their clients and to connect their platform profile to out-of-platform portfolios, so that clients can have an encompassing view of their professional experience: «I keep adding things to my website, my Instagram, doing a bit of marketing, a bit of connecting with people» (Ben, Jellow BE). Moreover, Jellow’s automated matching system is integrated with “real” platform staff that provides personalized guidance to clients for selecting the right freelancer: «we have contacts with that client and then we say that we will look in the system, walk through the database [of freelancers] and then make a selection» (Jellow management). This attention to quality – rather than price only – as highlighted by the platform, produces a fairer work environment where freelancers reported that «in most cases that [tariff] is being negotiated with the client» (Stefanie, Jellow BE).

This match-making tailored on clients and oriented to quality makes freelancers on Jellow less exposed to the downward competition logics evidenced on the other platforms, and therefore makes them less subject to do unpaid work within the performance of paid projects (i.e. tempered marketization). Rather the contrary: freelancers active on Jellow claim that «Jellow is actually the only one [platform] where I got some good assignments» (Kaat, Jellow BE). The lack of platform-specific score systems and the possibility to display their portfolios, combined with a less automated match-making oriented to quality rather than price only, generate a platform environment where price-based competition is relatively mitigated and, as a consequence, freelancers are able to negotiate tariffs that more fairly reflect the amount of work carried out, allowing freelancers to encounter relatively little problems to «pay social contributions, and on top of it I get enough to have fun» (Ben, Jellow BE). Against the background of the Belgian self-employment status, which is comparatively more regulated than in the other countries surveyed and on this account requires freelancers to shoulder higher fiscal responsibilities, the tempered marketization strategy established by the platform Jellow allows freelancers to keep tariffs up and, as a consequence, comply with the status-related fiscal dispositions while engaging in lesser amount of unpaid work in comparison to their fellow colleagues on the other three platforms studied.

Discussion and conclusion

Against the background of growing research claiming that unpaid labour is part and parcel of platform work in the digital economy (Casilli & Posada, 2019; International Labour Office, 2021; Terranova, 2000), this study offers an exploration of the mechanisms that lead to the production of unpaid labour on online freelancing platforms. We show how marketization strategies embedded in platforms' organizational models and supported by deregulated national self-employment regimes produce a mechanism that pushes workers to “beat down the price” of their projects to be competitive and access work; since price reduction does not entail a decrease in workload, many work activities within the paid employment remain unpaid.

For each platform, we show how they organize freelancers' access to work through competition with their peers (i.e. marketization), and how and to what degree these managerial features induce workers to carry out unpaid activities. In the case of Upwork and Malt, the platforms established strategies of *tight marketization* where they rely on a tight internal scoring

system that “guides” clients in their selection when they scroll down workers profiles. As success scores are closely tied to the numbers of missions performed and clients evaluations, freelancers strive to access jobs by pushing down prices and consent to clients requests (usually involving unpaid activities) to ensure a good review. Moreover, as time of response on the platform contributes to freelancer scores, workers feel the urge to be constantly on-call, expanding their unpaid working time and blurring boundaries between private and professional life. On an international platform like Upwork, freelancers with lower fiscal duties connected to their self-employment status, as in Poland, can more easily practice lower prices in comparison to colleagues from countries with relatively more regulated institutions of self-employment; yet, even here, as in the case of French freelancers on Malt, the self-employed can benefit from measures that increase the sustainability of this form of employment, such as the ACRE system for beginners and proportional social contributions schemes.

On a platform like AddLance in Italy, a strategy of *sheer marketization* is deployed as the platform induces workers to primarily compete on prices. Freelancers can only access work by filing applications (upon payment of platform currency) for offers posted by clients, and the platform organizes its functionalities in a way that clients are mainly driven to select on the prices proposed. This is because the platform does not employ a scoring system nor allows freelancers to create all-round professional profiles, while having an insufficiently developed scheme of reviews from previous clients; the combination of these three elements cater for a lack of guidance for clients when choosing the preferred worker, therefore orienting selection towards prices. Moreover, and importantly, the coexistence in Italy of different forms of self-employment (with different fiscal and social contributions charges attached) status fuels the downward pressure on prices established by this form of marketization.

A very different competition regime is found on the platform Jellow in Belgium. A *tempered marketization* strategy is here produced as the platform is oriented to quality rather than price, and offers tailor-made support to clients in finding the right worker, while at the same time giving freelancers the opportunity to reproduce their professional “portfolios” on their platform profiles (without pervasive scoring system). In a national context like Belgium, where self-employment entails fixed and relatively high charges, the quality-oriented competition environment created by Jellow allows freelancers to negotiate tariffs that allow them to cover project costs (with little or no unpaid work) and shoulder the costs of self-employment.

Hence, following scholarly claims that attention should be drawn to examine unpaid labour as problematic aspect of new forms of work, the present study deepens knowledge on unpaid in the expanding sector of online freelancing platforms. In line with research that identifies deregulation and marketization as important factors fostering degradation of working conditions (Greer & Doellgast, 2017; Macdonald & Charlesworth, 2016; Moore & Newsome, 2018; Pulignano, 2019), we find that freelancers in online platforms carry out unpaid work in response to the competitive dynamics they are confronted with on platforms. Indeed, we show how platforms are agents of marketization when they use algorithmic managerial practices to establish (different forms of) competition strategies that put downward pressure on prices, and we also point to the responsibility of institutional shifts towards deregulated forms of self-employment for contributing to produce a mechanism that induces workers to “beat down prices” and do more for less, thereby performing large amounts of unpaid work.

We stress how these institutional settings produce a «congenial environment» (Thelen, 2018) for employment marketization (Greer & Doellgast, 2017) that enables platforms to successfully deploy structures of competition to which freelancers participate by squeezing prices – which primarily entails crossing out from their budgets a number of activities that workers perform but go unpaid. Confirming extant literature that points to the globalization of online platform markets where freelancers based in lower-wage countries can undercut peers from richer countries, we contribute by more clearly connecting this argument to national regulations of self-employment. In fact, we show that the availability of deregulated (fiscally exempt) forms of self-employment not only create an advantage when competing on platforms but represent the very underlying condition that allows freelancers to engage with the downward competition on platforms. Finally, we evidence that the coexistence of diverse self-employment regulations (with different fiscal schemes) within the same country can further provoke “unfair” competition and undercutting on platforms even within one country.

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