

Defining Precarious Work

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What is Precarious Work?

Precarious work is unstable, uncertain, and without social protection (Allan et al., 2021). It is complex and dynamic and affects individuals, their families, and communities.

Precarious work is characterised by structural disadvantages (e.g., inadequacy of income, temporariness, non-applicability of social and labour regulations) and also linked to subjective experiences (e.g., worries about future, work, and life; lack of training and career opportunities).

A review of the academic literature identified five dimensions of precarious work (Seubert & Seubert, 2023, which confirmed earlier work by Brinkmann et al., 2006):

(1) **The reproductive-material dimension** refers to income and job insecurity. Both relate to (financial and material) uncertainty about the future. An income is regarded as precarious if it does not secure one's own (and one's family's) livelihood. Central here is the absence of a living wage - which enables people to live a decent life.

(2) **The social-communicative dimension** covers both social integration at work as well as work-related communication and cooperation. If these are absent or obstructed an employment relationship is described as precarious.

(3) **The legal-institutional (participation) dimension** relates to legal aspects of labour and social security (e.g., health and pension insurance) as well as health and safety at work. In addition it includes organisational policies on employee participation and voice as well as opportunities for vocational training and career promotion. An employment relationship is precarious if labour and social legislation or organisational policies do not (fully) apply to all workers, which effectively implies discrimination.

(4) **The status & recognition dimension** refers to recognition, appreciation, and social status gained in and from work. Here, a

precarious employment relationship is often associated with low(er) status jobs where one's work is less recognised and valued by personally relevant people.

(5) **The meaningful-subject-related dimension** refers to worker experience of meaningfulness and fulfilment as well as identification with a particular job. An employment relationship can therefore be described as precarious if it is accompanied by a lack of meaning and lack of identification with one's work.

Precarious work is embedded within multiple and diverse contexts (see Figure 1). It is important to consider context in order to understand what precarious work is and its consequences are. For example, a single parent working as a server with low income, weak social security benefits, and no financial support or financial resources (savings, investments, residential property) will struggle to make ends meet and will experience high levels of precariousness, whereas a student server with a wealthy family background gaining an equally low income will not experience such a high level of precariousness.

Multiple levels of contexts influence experiences of precarious work: individual and social level (work biography, gender, age, family background, migration, household income, savings, wealth etc.); organizational level (human resources practices, managers, employers, co-workers etc.); societal level (social benefits, social security net etc.), political level (activities by trade unions and NGOs, governments and their political agenda etc.), economic level (national/international labour market situation, economic crisis, inflation/deflation rate etc.)

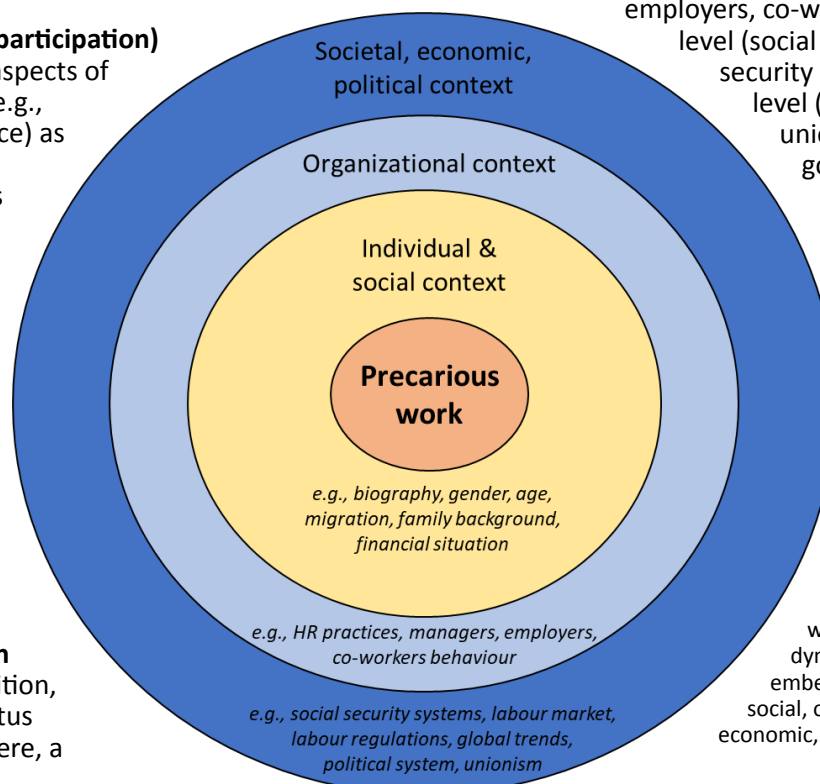


Figure 1. Precarious work is a complex and dynamic phenomenon embedded in individual, social, organizational, societal, economic, and political contexts

Why is Precarious Work important?

The majority of the world's workers are engaged in work that fits the definition of precarious work. In 2022, 214 million workers (6.4%) were living in extreme poverty (i.e., less than US\$1.90 per capita per day; ILO 2023). This means that despite being in paid work, these people can neither secure their livelihoods nor guarantee decent living conditions for themselves and their families. Moreover, two billion people worked within the informal sector lacking labour rights, social protection, and decent working conditions (ILO, 2023).

Although 93% of all informal work globally is in developing and emerging economies (ILO, 2018), precarious work is also common in formal economies. In Europe, a recent study on precarious work found that two out of three salaried workers are precariously employed (Matilla-Santander et al., 2019). Precarious work in Europe is more prevalent in Eastern and Southern Europe (Puig-Barrachina et al., 2014), and amongst women (particularly young women), migrants and those with low levels of education (Buckingham et al., 2020).

As these statistics indicate, precarious work is a widespread phenomenon, with global reach.

What are the consequences?

The negative consequences of precarious work on diverse levels are significant and alarming.

Effects of precarious work on *individuals* and their *families*

- impaired health and well-being
- impact on (working) behaviour and attitudes
- threat for social and work identity
- material and social deprivation
- experiences of discrimination
- increased vulnerability (e.g. for external shocks such as economic or pandemic crises), which in turn entrap them in poverty
- impact on future (job) opportunities and career prospects

Effects of precarious work on *organisations*

- increased injuries and occupational accidents
- increased costs for sick leaves
- negative impact on extra-role performance (e.g., less social support, more deviance)
- psychological contract breach
- less commitment
- lower job performance
- lower productivity rates

Effects of precarious work on *societies*:

- burden on the social security system by increased cost for sickness absence, higher levels of unemployment, early retirement
- reduced participation in social life because people don't have the necessary financial and social resources
- reduced social cohesion
- reduced participation in politics (e.g., election turnout)
- reduced participation in policy initiatives: precarious workers are less likely to be engaged in trade unions
- changes in social and political attitudes (reflected in increased right-wing orientations across Europe)
- threat to democracy and political stability

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