

Not One Gig Economy: Rethinking Platform Work Across Europe

Platform work is often portrayed as a single, uniform phenomenon – young people cycling food through city streets or freelancers working online. But our international research reveals a more complex and divided reality, with serious implications for public policy, regulation, and worker wellbeing.

We surveyed nearly 4,000 platform workers across seven European countries – Sweden, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Poland, Spain, and the UK – using a questionnaire based on the European Working Conditions Survey and the WHO-5 wellbeing index. Participants were categorized by platform type: on-location workers (e.g. ride-hailing, cleaning, delivery) and web-based workers (e.g. graphic design, transcription, software tasks).

The result is one of the most comprehensive comparative datasets on platform work in Europe to date.

Our findings challenge the idea of a single "gig economy."

Web-based work is typically pursued by highly educated individuals as a side income, while on-location work is often the primary livelihood for migrants and others with fewer labor market opportunities. These differences matter: job quality and mental health outcomes vary not only by work type, but also by country.



Across all countries, web-based workers reported better physical environments and lower work intensity. Yet in other job dimensions – such as autonomy, contract security, and social support – the results were more mixed and strongly shaped by national policy frameworks. Most strikingly, our mental health analysis showed that job quality, not the type of platform work, was the decisive factor: about 31% of both on-location and web-based workers scored below the clinical threshold for wellbeing on the WHO-5 scale. Poor well-being was consistently associated with insecure contracts, low autonomy, and irregular hours.

This means that regulating platform work requires improving fundamental job conditions and tailoring policies to different work types and national contexts. Policymakers who treat all platform workers the same risk missing key vulnerabilities – and opportunities for reform.

These insights have already informed discussions with union representatives, digital platform executives and representatives from DG Employment. By showing that platform work operates differently across Europe – and affects people in very different ways – our study helps shift the focus from abstract debates to concrete, evidence-based change.



Illustration by: DALL·E, AI