

## Labour exploitation in the (Italian) agri-food sector

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The European Union promotes sustainable development, free and fair trade and intends to protect human rights. Yet, evidence of people treated as ‘disposable commodities’ abounds across Europe, in particular in the agri-food sector: see [the case of Thai berry pickers unpaid for most of their seasonal work in Sweden](#); [Bangladeshi workers trafficked to Greece and forced to work at the main strawberry farm in Manolada](#); [undocumented migrants exploited in the Dutch mushroom industry](#).

Several [research projects](#) have denounced the exploitative working conditions to which migrants are subjected all over Italy: irregular employment, sub-minimum wages (ranging from 25 to 30 euro per day), excessively long working hours (typically from 6 am to 10 pm) not compensated by overtime pay, lack of workplace health and safety, occupational diseases and no access to basic medical aid, shameful living and hygiene conditions.

A few cases exemplify this exploitation. In the countryside around Ragusa (Sicily), Romanian female workers face a [‘double exploitation’](#), i.e. labour and sexual exploitation. They work up to eleven hours a day, six days a week, without protective measures despite they are in continuous contact with toxic pesticides. For the purpose of keeping such a job, they are also forced to go along with sexual requests of the employer. This has been recently brought to the attention of the [general public](#). It is important to note that the area represents one of the most important vegetables district in Italy, hosting the highest concentration of greenhouses that supply European consumers all year around, irrespective of weather or seasons.

The second case comes from the Agro Pontino (Lazio), where the Indian Sikh community is subjected to such exploitative and sometimes hazardous conditions that they use [performance-enhancing drugs and pain killers](#) to keep up with the inhuman work-rhythm imposed. Despite holding a valid work permit, they work 10-14 hours per day, seven day per week, for 3,00 euro per hour instead of 8,26 euro as stated by the relevant collective agreement. Cases of physical violence have been reported too. A criminal proceeding is on going.

Lastly, cases of labour exploitation have been detected also in the Northern region. In the area of production of high-quality wines, such as Moscato, Barolo and Dolcetto (Piedmont), grapes are harvested mainly by migrant workers under conditions that have been described as [close to slavery](#). Particularly, some local businesses tend to subcontract workers management to small firms, often owned by Macedonian workers who settled permanently in the area, so that they do not bear any responsibility in wage dynamics (workers mainly from Eastern Europe are paid two or three euro per

hour) and working conditions (many migrants find shelter in the countryside in order to be close to the fields, where they may be suddenly called to work, prioritising remitting over rent).

Tangible cases cannot be easily defined in terms of free or unfree labour, but they rather point to a continuum of exploitation. Such a concept has been introduced by [Skrivankova \(2010\)](#) to understand and analyse the wide range of situations beginning from decent work (the desirable situation) to forced labour (the unacceptable), overcoming the problem of absence of a clear definition of labour exploitation.

The very lesson to be learned is that in Italy labour exploitation seems to be ‘the way of production’ rather than a ‘few bad apples’.<sup>1</sup> As a result, consumers can easily come into contact with labour exploitation whenever they eat. Understanding labour exploitation not only as the product of individual behaviour has significant consequences for tackling the phenomenon beyond criminalisation of employers and traffickers on one side and the rescue of victims on the other. It is, indeed, a structural problem, lying in the dynamics of legitimate supply chain practices (e.g. extensive subcontracting). Therefore, the narrow criminal response has to be seen together with related policies aimed at alleviating factors that make persons vulnerable to exploitative practices while ensuring that breaking the law does not pay. Society needs a long-term targeted and multi-level strategy addressing the many intertwined factors that leave workers vulnerable, both individual factors (e.g. poverty, discrimination, precarious legal status, etc.) and deficiencies in the regulation of labour market and the global economy (e.g. general lack of economic opportunities, cuts in the social services budgets, lack of legal and viable migratory channels, etc.). On the contrary, toughening the State response to vulnerable workers who have fallen in breach of immigration regulations will have the effect of locking more people into systems of ‘modern slavery’ without hope of protection from the law.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, the fight against labour exploitation in the agri-food sector is only part of a larger struggle to promote compliance with international labour standards in today’s global economy, where companies operate transnationally while law enforcement is still primarily situated at the national level, often involving developing economies that may lack the regulatory and institutional capacity to effectively implement, monitor and enforce labour regulation. In the way in which food is grown, produced, consumed, traded, transported, stored and marketed lies the fundamental connection between People and Planet, and the path to inclusive and sustainable growth.

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<sup>1</sup> The pervasiveness of labour exploitation in the agri-food sector may be explained by its own peculiarities: seasonality of food production, the segregation of housing and cheap prices fixed by large scale retailers.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of modern slavery though not legal is used by some scholar to further an expansionist approach to the elimination of slavery, capturing slavery and slavery like practices, forced labour and trafficking in persons.



Paola holds a Master in Law by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Italy), where she also obtained her Ph.D. defending a thesis on the prevention of labour exploitation, specifically targeting the agri-food sector. Part of the research has been conducted within the Research Department at the International Labour Organization in Geneva. She has also been awarded a Van Calker Scholarship at the Swiss Institute of Comparative Law in Lausanne, where she studied recent efforts in mandatory human rights due diligence (i.e. the French law on due diligence and the Swiss Responsible Initiative). Currently, Paola is collaborating with one of the paramount law firms in Milano, engaged in human rights protection against all forms of discrimination, with a peculiar attention to migrants.