

Grey Work, Precarity, and Recognition in the Italian Performance Society

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Abstract

This article investigates the symbolic and material invisibility of grey and humble labor in contemporary Italy, drawn on a comparative empirical study conducted between Italy and Japan. Focusing on the Italian data, the research explores how workers engaged in non-standard, precarious, or undeclared labor experience social judgment, lack of recognition, and emotional distress. Through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative data and qualitative interviews, the study reveals how grey work is structurally excluded from both welfare protections and cultural legitimacy. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, and Guy Standing, highlighting the symbolic wounds caused by the absence of recognition, the dual injustice of misrecognition and maldistribution, and the political voicelessness of the precariat. The findings show that even when workers find personal satisfaction in their roles, they often face stigma, invisibility, and internalized failure. The article concludes by calling for inclusive labor policies and a cultural shift toward recognizing all forms of work—not only those deemed productive or prestigious—as socially valuable and worthy of dignity.

Keywords

Grey work, Precarity, Labor stigma, Performance society, Labor, Social justice, Italy

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, Western societies have undergone a profound transformation, increasingly shaped by the logic of performance. This “performance society” demands constant productivity, adaptability, and self-optimization from individuals, turning work into a measure of personal worth and social legitimacy. Within this framework, labor is no longer merely a means of subsistence—it becomes a symbolic arena where recognition, identity, and dignity are negotiated. However, not all forms of labor are equally visible or valued. In Italy, grey work—characterized by informal contracts, lack of contributions, and legal ambiguity—alongside undeclared labor and precarious employment, constitutes a significant portion of the workforce. These forms of labor, often performed by young people, migrants, and economically vulnerable individuals, remain socially invisible despite their material and emotional toll. Workers in these conditions frequently express frustration, exhaustion, and a sense of symbolic exclusion, as their efforts are neither recognized nor rewarded by society.

This article addresses the problem of labor invisibility, focusing on the symbolic consequences of grey and humble work in the Italian context. Drawing on a comparative empirical study conducted between Italy and Japan, it explores how non-standard labor is perceived, experienced, and socially (non-)recognized. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical contributions of Axel Honneth (1995), Nancy Fraser (2000), and Guy Standing (2011), as well as contemporary sociological reflections on performance, meritocracy, and neoliberal subjectivity. While the international literature has documented the structural and economic dimensions of precarious and informal work extensively, the symbolic and subjective consequences of grey labor – the experience of working without being socially recognized as a worker – remain comparatively understudied, particularly in the Southern European context. This article contributes to filling that gap by combining empirical data with a recognition-theoretical framework applied to the Italian case.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, situating the study within key debates on recognition, precarity, and performance; Section 3 presents the methodological approach, including the design and implementation of the questionnaire; Section 4 reports the empirical findings, focusing on grey work, precarity, and the emotional responses of workers; Section 5 discusses the symbolic dimensions of labor invisibility, interpreting the data through the lens of recognition theory; Section 6 concludes with scientific reflections and policy implications, advocating for a broader understanding of labor that includes dignity, visibility, and social justice.

2. Theoretical framework

The invisibility of grey and humble labor cannot be fully understood without addressing the symbolic dimension of work and the social mechanisms of recognition and exclusion. This section draws on the theories of Axel Honneth (1995) and Nancy Fraser (2000) to frame the empirical analysis of labor invisibility as a form of social suffering and symbolic injury. Axel Honneth's theory of recognition provides a crucial lens through which to interpret the subjective experiences of workers engaged in grey or humble labor. According to Honneth, social recognition is a fundamental human need, and its absence constitutes a form of symbolic violence. Recognition is not merely a psychological desire but a precondition for self-realization and social integration. Honneth (1995) identifies three spheres of recognition: love (in intimate relationships), rights (as legal subjects), and solidarity (as contributors to a shared social world). It is within this third sphere—solidarity—that labor becomes central. When individuals perceive their work as socially invisible or devalued, they suffer a symbolic wound: their contribution to society is denied, and their identity as workers is delegitimized. In the context of grey labor, this wound is particularly acute. Workers who operate without contracts, contributions, or legal protections often express feelings of frustration, shame, and exclusion. Their labor, though real and often essential, is not recognized as such. This lack of recognition undermines their sense of dignity and belonging, producing what Honneth would describe as a moral injury.

Nancy Fraser (2000) complements Honneth's theory by emphasizing the dual dimensions of justice: redistribution and recognition. While Honneth focuses on the moral and symbolic aspects of social life, Fraser insists that economic structures and cultural patterns must be addressed simultaneously. In her view, injustice arises both from material inequality (maldistribution) and from cultural devaluation (misrecognition). Fraser's framework (2000) is particularly relevant to the analysis of grey and humble labor. On the one hand, these forms of work are marked by economic precarity: low wages, lack of protections, and exclusion from welfare systems. On the other hand, they are culturally devalued: seen as unskilled, unambitious, or even shameful. This dual marginalization produces what Fraser calls "social suffering"—a condition in which individuals are both economically disadvantaged and symbolically disrespected. In the Italian context, this suffering is exacerbated by dominant narratives that stigmatize non-standard workers. Public discourse often portrays young people as lazy or entitled, ignoring the structural conditions that limit their opportunities. Meanwhile, those who perform humble or manual labor are rarely celebrated, even when their work is essential. As Fraser would argue, this reflects a failure of both redistribution and recognition—a systemic injustice that demands political and cultural redress. By integrating Honneth's emphasis on

symbolic wounds (Honneth 1995) with Fraser's critique of structural inequality (Fraser 2000), this article adopts a comprehensive approach to labor invisibility. It seeks to show that grey and humble work is not only materially precarious but also symbolically wounded—excluded from the social grammar of value and respect.

Guy Standing's concept of the "precariat" (Standing 2011) offers a powerful analytical tool for understanding the structural conditions behind the invisibility and devaluation of grey and humble labor. In his work, Standing identifies the precariat as a new emerging class, distinct from the traditional working class, characterized by chronic insecurity, lack of labor protections, and the erosion of collective rights. Precariat is not simply a group of precarious workers, it is a socio-economic condition marked by fragmented careers, unstable contracts, and the absence of long-term guarantees. Unlike the proletariat, which could rely on stable employment and union representation, the precariat is atomized, individualized, and often excluded from traditional forms of labor organization (Standing 2011). This condition is not accidental but is the result of deliberate neoliberal policies that have dismantled welfare systems, weakened labor protections, and promoted flexibility as a virtue.

In the Italian context, the precariat is particularly visible among young workers, many of whom are employed in internships, apprenticeships, or undeclared jobs. Standing (2011) emphasizes that the precariat is not only economically vulnerable but also politically voiceless. Its members often lack the means, time, or organizational structures to demand better conditions. This is reflected in the low levels of unionization among young workers, as confirmed by the interviews: many respondents, both in Italy and Japan, did not even understand the meaning of the word "union," and those who were unionized represented a negligible minority. Moreover, the precariat is subject to a form of moral judgment that further deepens its marginalization. Public discourse often frames precarious workers as "lazy," "entitled," or "unwilling to sacrifice," ignoring the structural barriers they face. This narrative not only obscures the real conditions of labor but also contributes to the symbolic devaluation of those who do not conform to the ideal of the successful, self-made worker.

Standing's analysis thus intersects with the theories of Honneth and Fraser: the precariat suffers both from material deprivation and symbolic misrecognition. It is excluded from the social contract, denied visibility, and blamed for its own condition. In this sense, the precariat is not only a labor category but a political and cultural fault line—one that reveals the contradictions of the performance society and the urgent need for new forms of solidarity and recognition.

The analysis of grey work and precarity in Italy must engage with the sociological tradition that has investigated its structural roots and existential effects. Pierre Bourdieu, in his inquiry into social suffering, described precarity not merely as an economic condition

but as a totalizing social misery, where the symbolic violence of exploitation becomes internalized, eroding the very foundations of self-esteem and life projects (Bourdieu et al. 1999). This approach usefully anchors Honneth's theory of recognition within a concrete sociology of inequality. For the Italian context, the work of Enrico Pugliese has demonstrated how irregular and grey labor is not an anomaly but a structural and functional mechanism of specific productive sectors, creating a "grey zone of citizenship" where rights are suspended (Pugliese 2020). The persistence of informal and undeclared work in developed economies is not simply a residue of incomplete modernization. As Marcelli, Williams and Joassart (2009) have shown, such work continues to exist and expand precisely because it fulfils structural economic functions, providing cheap and flexible labor to sectors that formal regulation struggles to reach. In this sense, grey work is not the exception to the rule – it is part of how the rule operates. Finally, research on young people by scholars like Ilaria Pitti highlights how labor precarity translates into an existential precarity, blocking transitions to adulthood and generating a deep sense of future uncertainty (Pitti 2020). These contributions provide the necessary empirical frame to interpret the narratives of invisibility, exploitation, and anxiety that emerge from the data.

The structural roots of this condition have been traced back to a series of labor market reforms introduced from the late 1990s onwards, which expanded flexible contracts while leaving welfare protections largely unchanged. As Berton, Richiardi and Sacchi (2009) argued, what was presented as a policy of flexibilization effectively produced a form of "flex-insecurity": the costs of flexibility were borne almost entirely by workers, particularly young entrants, without corresponding gains in either employment stability or social protection.

The Italian case is, in this sense, an instructive example of a broader European pattern. Barbieri (2009) showed that flexible employment in Europe tends to concentrate inequality rather than spread opportunity, functioning as a mechanism of labor market segmentation that systematically disadvantages younger cohorts and those with weaker bargaining power.

This picture is not unique to Italy. At the international level, Kalleberg (2009) has documented how the growth of precarious work since the 1970s represents a structural shift in employment relations across advanced economies, with systematic consequences for worker insecurity that extend well beyond individual labor contracts. His work helps situate the Italian findings within a broader comparative frame, showing that the erosion of stable employment is not a local anomaly but a common feature of post-Fordist labor markets. Still at the supranational level, the ILO (2016) has documented how non-standard employment has become a defining feature of contemporary labor markets globally, with workers in such arrangements systematically excluded from social

protections and facing greater income insecurity than those in standard employment. These forms are not marginal curiosities but represent a documented and growing segment of European labor markets. Mandl et al. 2015 identified at least nine distinct new forms of employment emerging across Europe since 2000, many of which – including casual work, on-demand work, and disguised self-employment – share the common characteristic of shifting risk and uncertainty onto the worker while weakening access to collective protections.

The symbolic and material invisibility of grey and humble labor must also be situated within broader sociological transformations that have reshaped the meaning of work and subjectivity in late modernity. Alain Ehrenberg (2010), in his analysis of the “society of discomfort,” highlights how contemporary individuals are increasingly burdened by the imperative of self-realization. In a context where traditional social bonds weaken, failure is no longer attributed to structural conditions but internalized as personal inadequacy. This dynamic is particularly evident among precarious workers who, despite their efforts, are unable to achieve the recognition promised by the performance society. The result is a widespread sense of anxiety, exhaustion, and symbolic disorientation.

Ulrich Beck’s concept of the “risk society” (1992) further illuminates the structural backdrop of labor precarity. In a world marked by deregulation and individualization, workers are left alone to manage systemic risks—unemployment, lack of welfare, and unstable careers. The erosion of collective protections transforms labor into a personal gamble, where failure is privatized and solidarity is eroded.

Chicchi and Simone (2017), in their work on the “performance society,” describe how neoliberal capitalism has colonized not only the economy but also the emotional and symbolic dimensions of life. Individuals are expected to be constantly productive, creative, and passionate—even in precarious conditions. This leads to a paradoxical situation in which workers are both exploited and emotionally invested in their own exploitation (Chicchi, Simone, 2022). The result is a form of “symbolic cannibalism,” “where the subject is consumed by the very system that demands their total engagement. Finally, Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of “liquid modernity” (2000, 2004) captures the instability and fragmentation of contemporary life. In a world where identities, careers, and relationships are fluid and uncertain, the ability to “stay afloat” becomes a moral imperative. Those who fail to adapt—such as workers in grey or humble jobs—are not only economically marginalized but symbolically excluded from the dominant narrative of success.

Taken together, these frameworks operate at different but complementary levels of analysis. Honneth provides the micro-level vocabulary for understanding how the absence of recognition is experienced as a personal wound; Fraser brings in the meso-level of cultural patterns and distributive structures that systematically produce that wound;

Standing identifies the macro-level political and economic conditions that generate the precariat as a structurally voiceless class. Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence ties these levels together by showing how structural inequality becomes internalized. Ehrenberg, Beck, Chicchi and Simone, and Bauman, finally, situate the whole picture within the broader logic of late-modern societies, where individual failure is decoupled from structural causes and reframed as personal inadequacy. It is within this multi-level framework that the Italian data are read in what follows (see Tab. 1).

Tab. 1 - Summary of the theoretical framework

Author	Key concept	Application to grey work
Honneth (1995)	Recognition (third sphere: solidarity)	Unrecognized work produces a symbolic wound
Fraser (2000)	Dual injustice (redistribution + recognition)	Grey work is excluded from both rights and cultural esteem
Standing (2011)	Precariat (chronic insecurity + political voicelessness)	Grey workers are atomized and politically invisible
Bourdieu et al. (1999)	Social suffering / symbolic violence	Instability is internalized as shame and personal failure

3. Methodological approach

This study was conceived as a comparative, mixed-methods investigation carried out in Italy and Japan, with harmonized tools and procedures across the two contexts. The original project collected more than two hundred responses overall; the present article focuses exclusively on the Italian sub sample, consisting of 93 participants. The comparative design served two purposes: first, to anchor the Italian evidence within a cross cultural frame in which key constructs performance, recognition/misrecognition, precarity, and grey or undeclared work could be operationalized consistently; second, to ensure that identical questions and response formats would allow like for like reading of patterns across the two settings. In this article, however, cross country findings are not developed; the Italian data are presented and discussed on their own terms, while the comparative scope is acknowledged as the design premise of the broader project.

The mixed methods approach combined structured survey items and open-ended questions. Quantitative items mapped contract types, contribution histories, perceived risks and stressors, and basic aspects of job satisfaction and recognition; qualitative

questions elicited short narratives on judgement, invisibility, and dignity at work. In line with the project's design, data were gathered both online and in person using the same questionnaire in each country. Descriptive statistics were used for the quantitative component, while the qualitative material was examined thematically with attention to the language of recognition, stigma, and emotional strain. Given the exploratory and non-probabilistic nature of the sample, no inferential analyses were conducted.

The empirical instrument was a 49-item questionnaire that integrated closed and open-ended questions derived from the theoretical framework on performance, recognition, and precarity. Items covered domains such as employment status and contract forms, pension contributions and undeclared grey work, perceived risk of impoverishment and precariousness, experiences of judgement or discrimination, and self-reported stress and emotional burden. Open ended prompts invited respondents to articulate, in their own words, how they experienced visibility, respect, and pressure at work. To ensure the operational translation of theoretical concepts into questionnaire items, each dimension was broken down into observable indicators. The concept of misrecognition (derived from the works by Honneth 1995 and Fraser 2000 discussed above) was operationalized by asking respondents whether they felt judged negatively for the kind of work they did (item 38), whether their superiors criticized them for refusing overtime (item 37a), and whether they perceived their job to be considered 'humble' by friends or acquaintances (item 38a). Maldistribution (Fraser 2000) was measured through questions on contribution histories, the absence of a formal contract, and the fear of impoverishment. The precariat as a political condition (Standing) was explored by asking respondents whether they felt represented by trade unions or whether they had ever attempted to organize collectively.

The questionnaire was developed in Italian and then translated into English and Japanese through a collaborative process involving native speakers and researchers familiar with the two contexts. In particular the author of this article is the only responsible of the translation (and any eventual mistakes), and he relied on the help of prof. Cabell (Toyo university, Japan) for the translation check from Italian to English, and of prof. Kitagawa and Liu (Toyo University) for the translation into Japanese (checking the consistency of the questionnaire) and the translation of the open answers from Japanese to Italian. The author, who conducted the research and the interviews, relied on his advanced level of English (C1) and intermediate level of Japanese (N3). Particular care was devoted to cultural and semantic equivalence for expressions that carry culture bound meanings terms such as hikikomori or success, as well as idioms around performance and recognition, so that every question had the same meaning and intensity, as much as possible, in all the versions (Japanese, Italian, English). Following an initial pilot administration, the instrument was revised for clarity and comparability and then used in its final form both online and in person in Italy and Japan.

In Italy, recruitment combined a public call disseminated through Instagram groups that hosted announcements for volunteers willing to be interviewed, followed by snowball procedures. During fieldwork, a broad balance by gender and age was maintained to preserve heterogeneity across labor conditions relevant to the study. The Italian fieldwork ran from September 2023 to January 2024. In line with the mixed-mode implementation, the questionnaire was administered both online and in person, and the quantitative summaries reported in the empirical sections drawing the synthesis tables presented in the final chapters of the original project for distributions on contract forms, contribution histories and perceived risks.

The broader comparative project relied on non-probability, exploratory sampling consistent with its cross-cultural aims. Overall, more than two hundred respondents participated across Italy and Japan; the present article focuses on the Italian sub sample of 93 participants. The sampling logic privileged coverage of labor situations relevant to the study's focus nonstandard, precarious, and grey or undeclared work alongside more regular forms of employment, so that patterns of recognition, perceived stigma, and risk could be mapped across heterogeneous conditions. Participants completed the same harmonized questionnaire in both countries, ensuring that item wording, response formats, and thematic prompts were comparable. The Italian sub sample therefore represents the national component of this cross-context design and is analyzed on its own terms here, without attempting statistical generalization.

Recruitment followed the mixed mode implementation of the instrument. The questionnaire was administered online and in person, allowing access to respondents in different work and study situations and facilitating inclusion of younger workers, those with intermittent or informal jobs, and individuals who had experienced periods without social contributions. In line with the project's emphasis on recognition and invisibility, the instrument included both closed items on employment status, contract type, and contributions history, and open prompts designed to capture first person accounts of judgement, discrimination, and dignity at work. The final Italian sample thus comprises respondents across sectors and contractual arrangements, including cases of undeclared work and self-employment with low or irregular income. Almost all Japanese interviews were conducted in-person, in Tokyo and the Kanto Area (Saitama pref., Kanagawa pref.). The selection of the participants in the study relied mainly on open spaces such as language exchange areas, community zones in Toyo university and cafeterias in Tokyo, where the author approached young people directly to ask whether they wished to participate in the study, and therefore conduct the interviews, mostly in the same day of the contact, without collecting contact data of the interviewees. Therefore, some interviewee furthermore collaborated suggesting names and contacts of next participants, de-facto constructing a snowball sampling.

Data collection in Italy used the final, piloted version of the 49-item instrument in two modes: online administration and in person completion. The same instrument, translated with attention to cultural and semantic equivalence, was used across countries to preserve comparability. Prior to participation, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and the intended use of data; participation was voluntary, and consent was obtained. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed throughout: no identifying information was collected, and quotations reproduced in the article are labelled only with minimal, non-identifying descriptors (for example, gender and age, or an interview/open response tag when relevant to the source of the text).

For the Italian material, quantitative responses were prepared for descriptive analysis while textual responses to open ended prompts were examined thematically. The in-person administration mirrored the online flow and used the same ordering of items, ensuring that mode did not alter the structure or meaning of questions. The overall dataset for Italy therefore integrates numerical indicators of contract forms, contributions, perceived risks, and satisfaction with short narrative accounts of visibility, judgement, and symbolic harm in everyday work

The questionnaire integrated closed and open-ended items organized around a small set of domains consistent with the theoretical framework on performance, recognition/misrecognition and precarity. Sociodemographic items captured basic background information (age, gender, education and region). Employment and contract items mapped current status, sector, contract forms and contribution histories, with explicit attention to episodes of undeclared or grey work and to situations of self-employment with low or irregular income. A group of perception items gauged salient risks and stressors linked to precariousness in everyday working life. In the Italian sub sample, the distribution of perceived threats placed the risk of impoverishment and the risk of precarity among the most prominent concerns, alongside work-related illness.

Recognition and stigma were addressed through items targeting social judgement and visibility at work. Respondents were asked whether they felt judged for the kind of work they did (for example, item 38 and 38a are cited in the empirical sections), whether superiors criticized them for refusing overtime or for not performing in expected ways (item 37a), and whether they had experienced discrimination (item 35). Additional items probed expectations and surveillance in everyday settings, perceived pressure to be positive or to smile more, and the emotional consequences of such demands (anxiety, exhaustion, feeling unheard). Open ended prompts invited brief narratives about dignity, recognition, and invisibility, and about concrete episodes in which contracts, contributions, or employer practices produced symbolic harm (for instance, being paid in cash without protection, or working for years without pension contributions).

Across these domains, items were framed to preserve the same constructs in both countries. In this article, figures reported for Italy follow the harmonized wording, while cross-country contrasts, when mentioned, remain descriptive and contextual.

The qualitative corpus analyzed for this article derives from the open-ended prompts embedded in the harmonized 49 item questionnaire, administered both online and in person. These prompts elicited short narrative accounts of work experiences, social judgement, (mis)recognition, coping and emotional strain. Quotations reported in the findings are presented verbatim (with minimal edits for readability), translated where necessary, and anonymized. To preserve the distinction between sources, excerpts originating from open responses are labelled accordingly (for example, Open response, female, 26) where the field notes recorded extended narrative responses collected during in person administration, these are identified with an interview style tag used at the time of data handling (for example, Interview 217), while still belonging to the same instrument and anonymity protocol. No identifying information was collected at any point, and the labelling follows a minimal, non-identifying scheme (gender/age when available, or the internal tag used during data processing).

Alongside the open-ended responses embedded in the questionnaire, short narrative interviews were conducted in Italy under the same conditions of consent and anonymity. Interviews were held mainly via video call, with additional face-to-face sessions; Italian was used throughout. Typical duration was around 60 minutes, with a minimum of 20 minutes and a maximum of 90 minutes. In analysis and reporting, passages originating from open responses are labelled as such, while excerpts drawn from the interviews carry an interview tag used during data handling; in both cases a minimal, non-identifying coding scheme is retained. This distinction makes it possible to separate text derived from the standardized instrument from material produced in the brief interviews collected within the stated fieldwork window.

4. Results, Grey and Undeclared Work

Before reporting the findings, it is worth noting that the experiences described in this section are not homogeneous. Among the Italian respondents, at least three distinct profiles can be identified. The first includes workers entirely off the books – typically in hospitality, catering or domestic services – who have no formal contract and no social contributions whatsoever. The second includes workers under fictitious self-employment arrangements, particularly those holding a *partita IVA* to mask what is effectively subordinate labor, with limited bargaining power and irregular income. The third includes workers in formally recognized but highly precarious positions – short-term contracts,

internships, apprenticeships – who do have some legal protection but remain excluded from full welfare entitlements and from any realistic prospect of stable employment. These profiles are not mutually exclusive, and several respondents had moved between them over time. The analysis that follows draws on testimony from all three, and where the experience described is specific to one profile, this is noted.

The Italian labor market is characterized by a significant presence of grey and undeclared work, particularly among young workers. This includes a wide range of situations: from informal jobs without contracts or contributions, to freelance work under false autonomy, to precarious contracts that offer little protection. These forms of labor are often invisible in official statistics and socially devalued, despite being widespread and essential to many sectors.

Among the 93 Italian respondents, a substantial number reported having worked without a formal contract, especially during their student years. Many also indicated that they had not paid pension contributions for extended periods, even after entering the labor market. This aligns with national estimates, which suggest that approximately 600,000 individuals in Italy work in conditions that do not require them to declare income or pay contributions—such as occasional jobs below the €5,000 annual threshold or low-income freelance work.

The phenomenon of “invisible workers” includes: Those employed entirely off the books (*in nero*); Platform workers and riders in the gig economy; Freelancers with low or irregular income; Workers under “false” self-employment (e.g., partite IVA used to mask subordinate labor).

Additionally, the issue of “contract dumping” emerged, where workers employed through subcontractors or cooperatives receive less favorable contracts than their directly hired counterparts, even when performing the same tasks.

Several respondents described their experiences with grey or undeclared work. The following excerpts, translated faithfully from the original interviews, illustrate the diversity and complexity of these situations:

“Initially my first jobs were in the restaurant industry. I handed out résumés in Como, Rome, Milan. The pay was fair for a young person. Everything was off the books, except for one job. The pay was normal, but it was fine. As for contracts, I worked as an educator at 20 years old, for 5 or 6 months in a social-health organization. I found it through friends, and then online, I worked as a tourist entertainer. I also worked as an actor, in a company, managing with contracts, hired for scripts and on-call for shows.”

– Male, 28, humanities degree

“With a partita IVA, there’s no negotiation. Employers hold all the power.”

– Female, 25, social sciences degree, general laborer

“I’m not free to express my opinion, also because I work in high-end catering, and being self-employed, there’s little room to be proactive.”

– Male, 26, social sciences degree, general laborer

These testimonies reveal a recurring theme: the absence of legal protections and the symbolic invisibility of the work performed. Even when the tasks are demanding or socially useful, the lack of formal recognition—through contracts, contributions, or institutional support—leads to a sense of marginalization and frustration. In many cases, respondents expressed uncertainty about their future, particularly regarding pensions. Some had worked for years without paying into the system, and now fear they may never retire. Others described their work as “not real” or “not respected,” despite finding it personally meaningful. This duality—between subjective satisfaction and social devaluation—will be further explored in the next sections, where we examine the emotional and symbolic consequences of labor precarity.

The data reported below speak directly to what Standing (2011) identifies as the defining anxiety of the precariat: not just present insecurity, but the impossibility of planning a stable future. The Italian labor landscape is marked by widespread job insecurity, a pervasive fear of impoverishment, and deep uncertainty about future pension eligibility. These conditions are not only economic but also emotional, producing anxiety, frustration, and symbolic wounds among workers—especially the young and those in non-standard employment. The data collected from the Italian sample reveal a significant perception of risk and instability. According to the frequency distributions, the most commonly perceived threat is the risk of impoverishment, with 32.5% of respondents stating they feel “very” or “extremely” at risk. This is followed by the risk of precarity (30.7%) and the risk of work-related illness (27.8%). When disaggregated by country, the Italian respondents show significantly higher levels of perceived risk compared to their Japanese counterparts: Risk of precarity: 49.5% in Italy vs. 15.8% in Japan; Risk of impoverishment: 50.0% in Italy vs. 18.4% in Japan.

These figures reflect a broader structural reality: in Italy, precarious contracts, low wages, and irregular contributions are common, especially among young workers. Many respondents reported having worked for years without paying into the pension system, raising serious concerns about their future retirement.

“Despite working for over ten years, I only recently started paying pension contributions. This means I’ll retire later, and with less.”

– Male, 30, humanities graduate

The emotional toll of precarity is evident in both the quantitative and qualitative data. Respondents frequently cited stress, anxiety, and fear of failure as central to their work experience. The main sources of stress included: Long or irregular shifts; Excessive demands from employers; Lack of job security; Fear of not performing well; Constant surveillance and judgment.

“I feel very bad, they don’t listen to me, they do mob”

– Female, 27, part-time worker

“Terrible, fake contract, illegal hours. From mid-June to the end of August I did not have a single day off, totally illegal.”

– Male, 30, hospitality sector

The questionnaire also included items on emotional well-being, including experiences of isolation, depression, and the use of psychiatric medication. While not all respondents reported clinical symptoms, many described a persistent sense of exhaustion and emotional depletion—consistent with what literature defines as burnout.

This emotional burden is compounded by a broader cultural narrative that equates success with constant performance and stigmatizes failure. As discussed in the theoretical framework, this leads to what has been described as “conditional self-worth”: the belief that one’s value depends entirely on external achievements.

These findings confirm that precarity is not only a material condition but also a psychological and symbolic one. It produces not just economic vulnerability, but also emotional fatigue, social invisibility, and a deep sense of frustration.

This section addresses the recognition dimension in Fraser’s sense: not economic exclusion alone, but the cultural devaluation of certain forms of work and the social judgment it produces. The perception of humble labor in Italy is deeply shaped by cultural narratives, social expectations, and symbolic hierarchies. While many respondents express satisfaction with their work, they also report a lack of recognition, social judgment, and internalized stigma – especially when their jobs are considered “low-status” or “non-prestigious.”

The questionnaire data reveal that a significant portion of Italian respondents feel judged for the type of work they do. In particular, humble jobs—such as manual labor, caregiving, or service work

– are often perceived as less valuable, even when they are personally fulfilling.

“Some of my friends consider my job humble.”

– Questionnaire item 38a (translated)

This perception is not limited to peer groups. Respondents also report criticism from colleagues, superiors, and even family members, especially when they refuse to work overtime or prioritize personal well-being.

“My superiors criticize me because I don’t do overtime.”

– Questionnaire item 37a (translated)

“I feel judged negatively for the kind of work I do.”

– Questionnaire item 38 (translated)

These responses highlight a contradiction: workers may be satisfied with their tasks and performance, yet still feel undervalued due to external judgments. The performance society, as described in the theoretical framework, equates success with visibility, prestige, and upward mobility—leaving humble labor symbolically excluded. Lack of recognition often leads to internalized stigma. Respondents describe feeling “invisible,” “not listened to,” or “not valued,” even when they are committed and competent in their roles.

“I left my job (in a school) because I wasn’t being considered.”

– Open response, male, 29

This emotional tension—between satisfaction and symbolic exclusion—produces frustration, anxiety, and a diminished sense of self-worth. The desire to be seen and respected clashes with the reality of being overlooked or dismissed.

The following evidence touches on what Honneth would locate in the sphere of rights: the denial of equal treatment that constitutes a further layer of symbolic injury. Discrimination also plays a role in shaping the perception of humble work. According to the questionnaire (item 35), respondents report being discriminated against for various reasons, including gender (i.e., women are often judged more harshly, especially in male-dominated sectors or when expressing desires related to maternity), and territorial origins (i.e., workers from southern regions or rural areas report being stereotyped or excluded from certain opportunities).

“For political reasons, I received a job offer which was later withdrawn because they realized I had been politically active in a local civic group.”

– Interview excerpt, male

These forms of discrimination extend beyond the workplace, reflecting broader patterns of social control and symbolic violence. Employers and superiors sometimes monitor workers’ online presence, using personal beliefs or aspirations as grounds for exclusion.

“They even went along with me but then did what they wanted. There were negative consequences.”

– Open response, male, 27

This contradiction reflects the symbolic wound described by Honneth: when labor is not socially recognized, it fails to affirm the worker’s identity and dignity, even if it is personally fulfilling.

5. Invisible Labor as Symbolic Wound

In Italy, the low levels of unionization among young workers, the prevalence of informal contracts, and the widespread fear of impoverishment are commonly recalled by interviewees. Many respondents did not even understand the concept of a union, and those who were unionized represented a negligible minority.

“I’m not free to express my opinion, also because I work in high-end catering, and being self-employed, there’s little room to be proactive.”

– Male, 26

Standing’s analysis reveals that invisibility is not accidental—it is systemic. The precariat is produced by neoliberal policies that dismantle protections and promote individualization. It is a class without voice, without visibility, and without recognition. The testimonies gathered confirm that the grey work described by our respondents is not a marginal episode but a systemic condition, aligning with Pugliese’s analyses of its structural role in the Italian economy. The prevalence of informal contracts, fictitious self-employment, and cash payments – often accepted for lack of alternatives – creates a vicious cycle of exclusion from both social protection (maldistribution) and cultural legitimacy (misrecognition). As Bourdieu noted, this condition inflicts a form of social suffering that is both objectively inscribed in precarious material conditions and subjectively lived as a delegitimization of one’s place in the world. The experience of working for years without pension contributions, reported by several interviewees, is a stark example of this dual injustice: it is a tangible economic threat to future security and a powerful symbolic message that one’s labor does not count toward societal membership or deserve a guaranteed future. The symbolic invisibility of humble and grey labor in Italy is reinforced by cultural narratives that moralize work and delegitimize non-standard paths. These narratives are deeply embedded in popular sayings, media discourse, and everyday language, and they contribute to the symbolic violence experienced by workers who do not conform to the dominant ideal of success.

Italian popular culture is saturated with proverbs that glorify labor as a moral duty and a source of dignity. Sayings such as: “*Chi non lavora non fa l’amore*” (a line from a song by Adriano Celentano, tr.: “Those who don’t work don’t make love”); “*Chi si vergogna di lavorare, abbia vergogna di mangiare*” (“Those who are ashamed of working should be ashamed of eating”); “*Il lavoro nobilita l’uomo*” (“Work ennobles man”); “*Chi non lavora muore nella paglia*” (“Those who don’t work die in the straw”). These expressions construct a moral framework in which work is not only necessary but sacred. Within this framework, those who do not work—or who work in informal, precarious, or low-status jobs—are seen as morally deficient. This cultural backdrop fuels the widespread belief that young people today are “lazy” or “unwilling to sacrifice,” a narrative frequently echoed in media and political discourse.

However, as several interviewees point out, the issue is not a lack of willingness to work, but the exploitative conditions under which work is often offered:

“It happens all the time in society in *Italy*: since you’re young, you have to get your way up, work hard and earn little, and beware of criticizing or demanding benefits, a contract, a private life.”

– Male, 26, social sciences degree, general laborer.

This testimony directly challenges the dominant narrative, revealing how the moralization of labor obscures the structural realities of precarity and exploitation. The symbolic violence of being “invisible” despite working is a recurring theme in the interviews. Respondents describe being asked to smile more, to be more enthusiastic, and to accept excessive demands without complaint:

“My boss said I should smile more and work better. I was disappointed by his words.”

– Interview 217

“I feel like society expects too much from me.”

– Questionnaire item 39c

This emotional labor—being required to perform positivity while enduring instability—adds another layer of invisibility. Workers are not only materially precarious but also symbolically erased, expected to conform to ideals of enthusiasm and flexibility while their real conditions are ignored. In sum, the cultural devaluation of humble work is not neutral. It is a form of symbolic violence that delegitimizes the experiences of countless workers. It silences their voices, erases their contributions, and reinforces a narrow, moralized vision of labor that excludes those who do not—or cannot—conform.

6. Conclusions: Grey Work, Precarity, and Symbolic Wounds

This article has explored the symbolic and material dimensions of invisible labor in contemporary Italy, focusing on grey work, humble occupations, and the lived experiences of precarious workers. Drawing on a comparative empirical study and grounded in the theories of Honneth, Fraser, and Standing, the findings reveal a consistent pattern of exclusion, frustration, and symbolic harm among workers who are denied basic protections or subjected to exploitative conditions. Beyond the economic dimension, the study highlights the emotional and symbolic consequences of labor invisibility. Workers in humble or non-standard roles frequently experience social judgment, internalized stigma, and a lack of recognition—even when they find personal satisfaction in their work. The contradiction between subjective fulfillment and external devaluation emerges as a central theme, producing what Axel Honneth defines as a symbolic wound.

The emotional burden documented in the findings – the pervasive anxiety, fear of failure, and exhaustion – extends beyond individual stress responses. It reflects what Ilaria Pitti and other scholars of youth studies term a “biographical suspension,” where labor instability corrodes the capacity to imagine and plan for a stable adult life. This biographical dimension of labor instability has Italian roots in qualitative research: Fullin (2004) documented, already two decades ago, how workers on unstable contracts struggle to construct a coherent professional identity, living their condition as one of permanent temporariness with no clear horizon of stabilization. The narratives collected in this study echo that earlier finding with striking continuity, suggesting that the problem has deepened rather than resolved itself in the intervening years. The precarity described is thus not confined to the workplace; it invades the temporal horizon of the individual. This existential dimension of precarity, where the instability of work becomes the instability of life itself, helps explain the profound sense of frustration and disorientation expressed by respondents, even when they report personal satisfaction in their tasks. Their struggle is not only for a better contract but for a recognizable future and a socially validated identity. The demand for constant positivity and adaptability, captured in reports of being asked to “smile more” or show unwavering enthusiasm, points to a deeper layer of labor control.

In short, the recognition of labor must go beyond productivity. It must affirm the humanity, effort, and value of all workers—especially those who remain unseen. The findings of this study suggest the urgent need for labor policies that go beyond economic metrics and embrace a broader, more inclusive understanding of work. Grey and humble labor, though often invisible in institutional frameworks, constitutes a vital part of the economy and social fabric. Yet these forms of labor are systematically excluded from both material protections and symbolic recognition. To address this, welfare systems

must be restructured to include all workers—regardless of contract type, contribution history, or employment status. This includes: Ensuring access to social protections (e.g. pensions, healthcare, unemployment benefits) for informal and precarious workers; Recognizing unpaid or underpaid labor (e.g. internships, care work, gig economy roles) as socially valuable; Promoting labor dignity through public discourse, education, and media representation; Strengthening labor inspections and protections against exploitation, especially in sectors where informal work is prevalent.

Moreover, recognition must be institutionalized not only through legal reforms but also through cultural change. This means challenging the dominant narratives that equate success with prestige and productivity, and instead affirming the value of all forms of labor—especially those that are currently marginalized. Before turning to implications, it is worth pausing on what this study can and cannot claim. Its strengths lie in the combination of quantitative mapping and qualitative depth, in the attention to the subjective and symbolic dimensions of precarity that survey data alone would miss, and in the grounding of individual narratives within a theoretically articulated framework. The testimonies collected give voice to experiences that official statistics render invisible. At the same time, the study has clear limits: the non-probabilistic sample of 93 Italian respondents does not allow statistical generalization, and the snowball recruitment may have overrepresented workers already critically aware of their conditions. The cross-sectional design cannot capture how symbolic wounds evolve over time or whether they deepen with prolonged exposure to precarity, a question that longitudinal research will need to address. Finally, the data confirm the analytical purchase of Honneth's recognition framework and Fraser's dual model of justice in the Italian context, but they also suggest that these frameworks may need to be supplemented with a stronger account of temporal experience – the way precarity colonizes not just the present but the imagined future.

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, the comparative dimension between Italy and Japan—only partially explored here – deserves further development. Cross-cultural analysis can illuminate how different societies construct labor value, recognition, and precarity, and how these constructions affect workers' experiences. Second, longitudinal studies are needed to trace the long-term effects of grey and precarious work on individuals' well-being, identity, and life trajectories. Such research could provide deeper insight into how symbolic wounds evolve over time and how they intersect with material conditions. Finally, future research should evaluate the effectiveness of policy interventions aimed at improving labor recognition and inclusion. This includes assessing the impact of welfare reforms, labor inspections, and public campaigns on the visibility and dignity of non-standard workers.

By integrating empirical data with critical theory, this article contributes to a growing body of research that seeks to reframe labor not only as an economic activity but as a site of identity, recognition, and justice.

[Submitted 2 October 2025 – Accepted 9 June 2026]

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