REBALANCE
DEMOCRACY
& CAPITALISM

Research report

Protecting Lives at Work: Advancing Labor Rights in Italy

VERSION – 1 05 2025

AUTHORS:
Elisa Giuliani (University of Pisa, Italy); **Marco Fasciglione** (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, CNR, Napoli, Italy); **Giulia Rossello** (University of Pisa, Italy); **Nadia Bernaz** (University of Wageningen, NL); **Chiara Macchi** (University of Wageningen, NL)

The normative context

Employers are generally expected to ensure safe and healthy working conditions. Besides employees themselves, various stakeholders such as trade unions, industry associations and other members of society demand that employers have reasonable safety systems in place to prevent accidents. This responsibility of employers to ensure safe and healthy working conditions has been grounded in legal systems in Europe and the rest of the world for decades in the form of occupational health and safety law and regulations.

Importantly, international legal and policy developments in the field of business and human rights in the past two decades have provided an opportunity to change the way these issues can be framed.

Funded by the European Union

Grant n. 101061342

Università di Pisa · Hertie School · Stockholms universitet · Università Ca'Foscari Venezia · University of Bath · Wageningen University & Research · source

In particular, the 2011 United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), adopted by the UN Human Rights Council, establish a corporate responsibility to respect human rights which exists independently from and in complementarity with the State's own obligations. While this responsibility is not binding and not directly enforceable under international law, it nevertheless uses core international human rights and International Labour Organization (ILO) treaties and standards as benchmarks. Under this business and human rights framework, deaths and injuries in the workplace are violations by the employer of the employee's right to life and right to physical and mental integrity enshrined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), or in Article 3 of the European Social Charter (ESC). Also, unhealthy or dangerous working environments may compromise the right to health, since one-off accidents or long-term poor working conditions can affect a person's health and well-being, including mental health protected under Article 25 UDHR, Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and Article 11 ESC. In the same vein, safe and healthy working conditions are also considered an integral part of the right to work established in Article 23 UDHR, Article 7 ICESCR and Article 1 ESC, which encompasses also the right to enjoy just and favourable conditions of work (Article 2 ESC).

Framing workplace fatalities and injuries as human rights issues sheds new light on these incidents with important legal and societal consequences. For example, wounded employees, or surviving family members are not just injured parties who need to be compensated financially. They are rights-holders who can mobilize their rights in courts and in advocacy campaigns. Employers who have failed to put adequate systems in place have not just broken health and safety law, they have violated human rights. While corporations or individuals cannot be held liable before an international human rights court or treaty bodies, domestic courts can reference international human rights and labour rights standards to interpret domestic norms and establish liability for violations of workers' rights. Hence, reducing safety and health risks in their operations and supply chains has become crucial for businesses. This requires putting in place preventive measures in respect of occupational accidents and diseases and human rights due diligence is the tool for realizing it.

Several instruments describe the due diligence steps that businesses should ideally implement to address human rights issues, including occupational safety and health. Besides the abovementioned UNGPs, the OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises include labour rights as part of the content of the responsible business conduct. The OECD Guidelines' recommendations on labour rights can and have been leveraged in specific instances filed with OECD National Contact Points against companies allegedly failing to fully comply with such standards.[1] Also, the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (MNE Declaration), contains the most detailed guidance on due diligence in respect to labour rights.

As far as business and human rights is concerned, in Italy an extensive legislative framework does exist in several relevant areas, including labour rights, anti-discrimination, occupational health and safety, and the environment. The domestic legal framework generally includes a strong system of labour rights protection across sectors as well as an active trade union movement. In addition, Italy

1 See, for instance: French NCP, Specific instance filed by UNI Global Union and four French Trade Union Federations v. Teleperformance, 2020.

was among the first States to adopt a National Action Plan on business and Human Rights (NAP) in 2016 and to initiate a mid-term review of progress in its implementation. At the expiration of the first NAP, Italy has adopted a second revised one (2021). All these endeavours illustrate the positive practices by the Government to meet its obligation to protect people and the environment from business-related harm.

However, and notwithstanding such existing efforts, Italy still faces several critical challenges that necessitate prompt and decisive action by the Government in the short term, coupled with the formulation of comprehensive strategies to address systemic issues over the medium and long term. Following a 2021 visit to Italy, the UN Working Group on Business and Ruman Rights produced a report where it enumerated a broad list of concerns, with related recommendations for domestic authorities (OHCHR, *Visit to Italy - Report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises*, UN Doc. A/HRC/50/40/ADD.2, 17 June 2022). The report documented the treatment of workers, especially migrant workers, in various sectors – and especially in the agribusiness and garment sectors – as being far from aligned with international instruments on human rights protection: the increasing rate of deaths and injuries at work and the other widespread violations of occupational health and safety rules, included the exploitation of forced labour, are a crucial example of this persisting protection gap. In the same vein, an evident clash exists between industrial-economic development priorities and the respect for human rights and the environment, with negative impacts on human rights of individuals, communities. Also, critical gaps exist in respect to the gender equality dimension, where women working in the agriculture, construction and logistics sectors are increasingly facing sexual harassment, gender-based violence and other forms of discrimination, including online shaming.

The gravity of these issues has raised multiple concerns from international bodies monitoring human rights treaties.

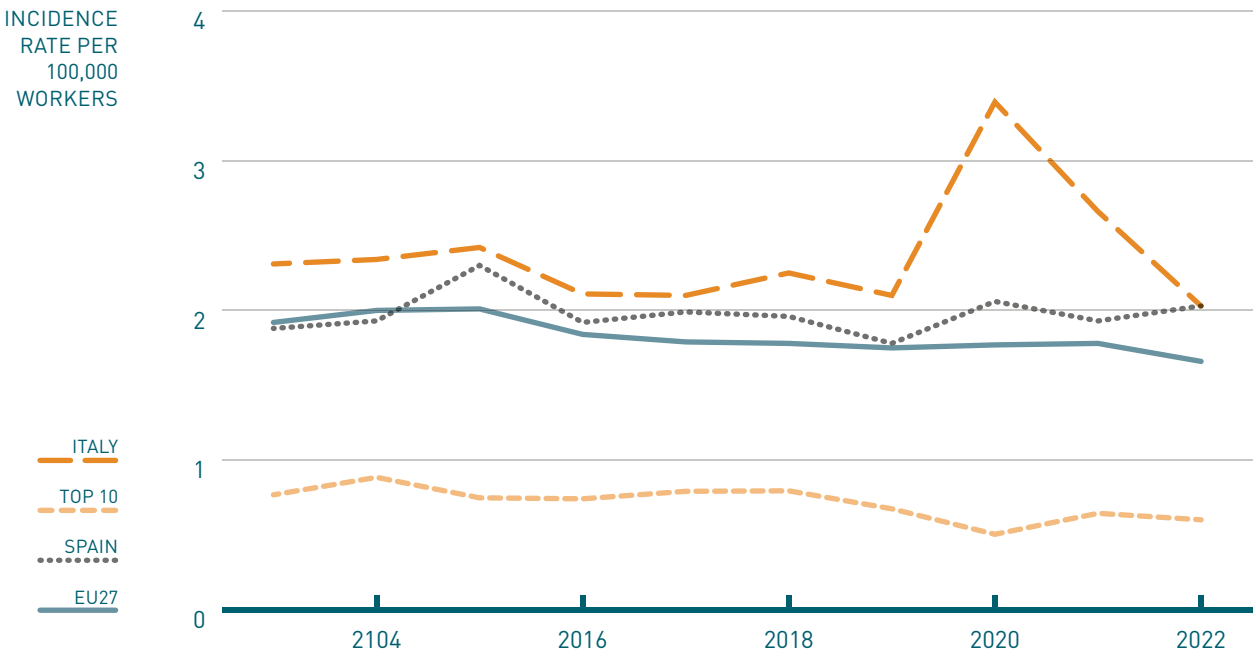
In the following section, we analyse official data on both fatal and non-fatal workplace accidents in Italy.

The evidence: Italy as a problematic case of fatalities at work

Workplace fatalities in Italy: a comparative outlook

According to data from Eurostat's European Statistics on Accidents at Work (ESAW), Italy has reported a relatively high number of fatal workplace accidents compared to other EU member states (for a review of the data sources, see Appendix A). Since 2013, the country's fatal accident rate—measured per 100,000 workers—has remained above the EU27 weighted average. Notably, it exceeds the rates observed in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, which fall within the top decile of member states with the lowest incidence of workplace fatalities across economic sectors over the 2013–2022 period (hereafter "Top10"). Italy's rate is also slightly higher than that of Spain, a country chosen here as a point of institutional comparison (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Incidence rate of fatal workplace accidents per 100,000 workers

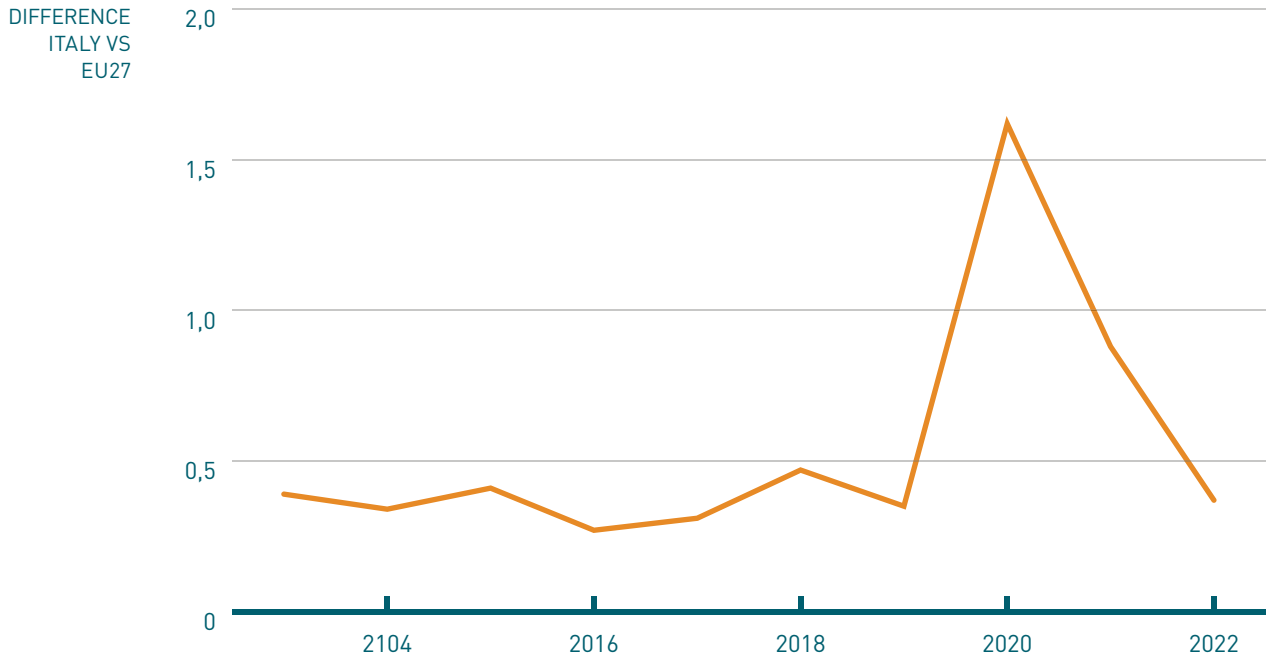


Source: Our analysis based on Eurostat ESAW data.

Note: The data include all economic sectors, including the extractive sector. Top10 for best performance in workplace accident rates across sectors for the whole period (lower incidence) include Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. The EU27 figure represents the weighted average for the EU27 in 2020, as calculated by Eurostat. Averages are weighted by the size of the EU27 member countries' economy.

A closer examination of the gap between Italy and the EU27 weighted average (Figure 2) reveals a consistently positive difference throughout the observation period, indicating a persistently higher incidence of workplace fatalities in Italy relative to the EU average. This gap has remained relatively stable over time, with only a modest upward trend in 2020, likely attributable to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which appears to have disproportionately affected certain occupational groups in Italy (Modenese and Gobba 2020).

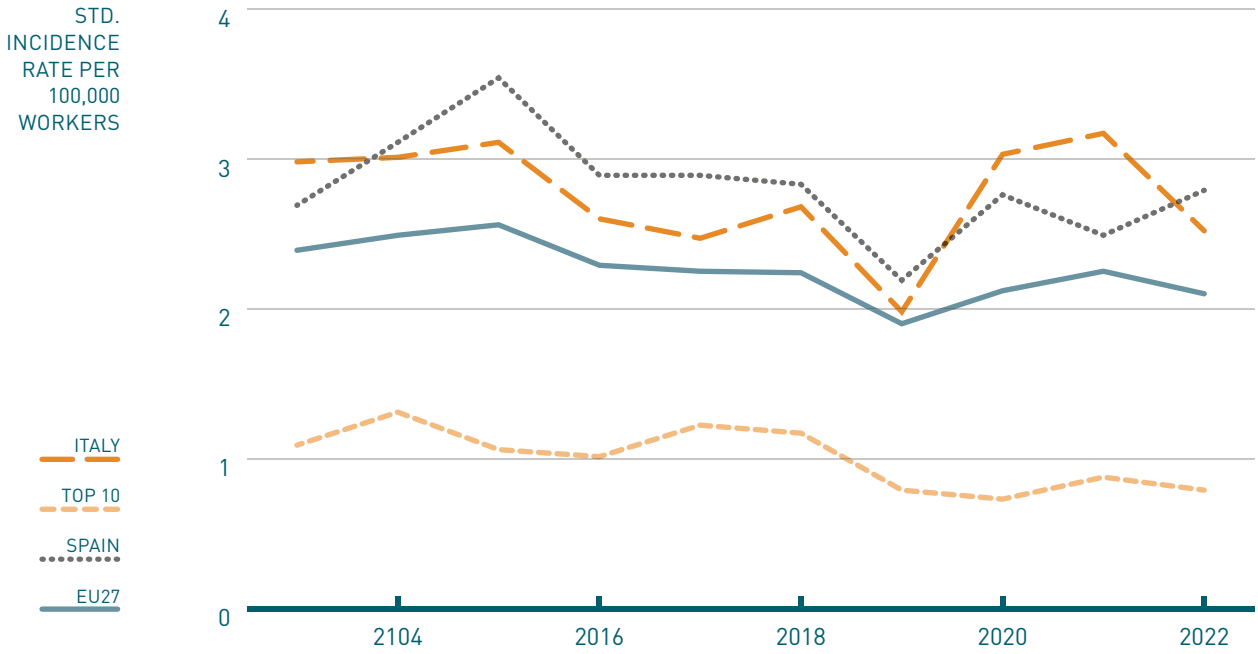
Figure 2: Difference between Italy and EU27 in the incidence rate of fatal workplace accidents per 100,000 workers



Source: Our analysis based on Eurostat ESAW data.
Note: The data include all economic sectors, including the extractive sector. The difference is computed between Italy year data and EU27 countries' weighted averages.

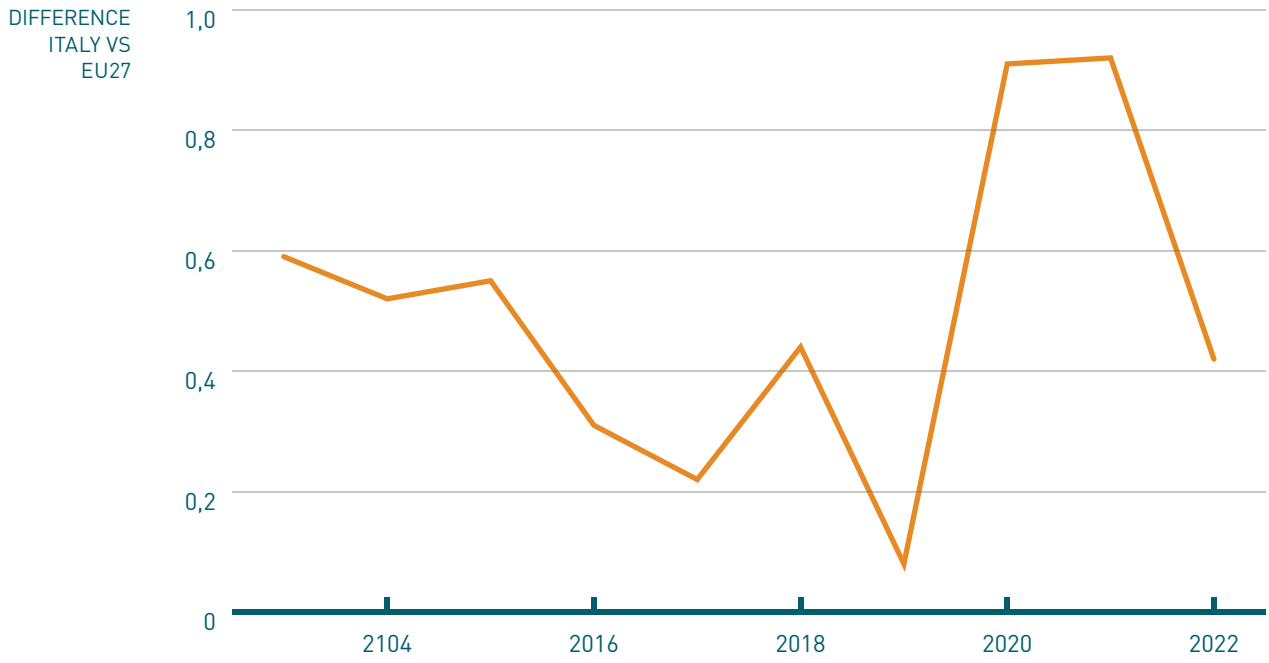
These figures remain consistent also when we consider the fatal accident rate adjusted for the relative sizes of economic sectors at the EU level, based on the ESAWs' standardized rate of workplace fatalities per 100,000 workers (Figure 3 and 4), where Italy continues to display a higher incidence than the EU27 weighted average throughout the entire observed period. Furthermore, when the comparison is adjusted for sectoral composition—using standardized workplace fatality rates—the data (Figure 4) show that the gap between Italy and the EU27 weighted average, which had narrowed between 2015 and 2019, has widened again in more recent years. This suggests that even after accounting for differences in the relative size of economic sectors, Italy continues to exhibit higher fatality rates than the EU average.

Figure 3: Standardized rate of workplace fatalities per 100,000 workers



Source: Our analysis based on Eurostat ESAW data.
Note: The rate is adjusted for the relative sizes of economic sectors at the EU level. The data exclude the extractive sector. EU27 represents the weighted average for the European Union in 2020, as calculated by Eurostat. Top10 are among the EU27 countries, those in the top 10% for best performance in workplace accident rates across sectors for the whole period and include Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

Figure 4: Difference between Italy and EU27 in the standardized rate of fatal workplace accidents per 100,000 workers



Source: Our analysis based on Eurostat ESAW data.
Note: The difference is computed between Italy year data and EU27 figures. The rate is adjusted for the relative sizes of economic sectors at the EU level. The data exclude the extractive sector. EU27 represents the weighted average for the European Union in 2020, as calculated by Eurostat.

Work-place fatalities in Italy: typologies and sectoral differences

Table 1 presents the percentage breakdown of workplace fatalities by their cause in 2021, relative to the total number of fatalities that year[2]. Notably, as compared to EU27 averages, Italy shows a higher incidence of deaths from wounds and superficial injuries, poisoning and infections, and exposure to extreme temperatures. It is important to clarify that these figures pertain exclusively to deaths caused by workplace accidents, excluding fatalities linked to occupational diseases (see Appendix B for an overview).[3]

Table 1: Percentage of cause of death types out of total fatalities (year 2021)

Type	Italy % over total	EU27 % over total	Difference Italy - EU27
Bone fractures	28.96	9.63	19.33
Wounds and superficial injuries	19.18	5.48	13.7
Poisonings and infections	14.48	3.52	10.96
Effects of temperature extremes, light and radiation	13.11	2.41	10.7
Traumatic amputations (Loss of body parts)	0.39	1.31	-0.92
Dislocations, sprains, and strains	0.2	0.5	-0.3
Concussions and internal injuries	0	22.74	-22.74
Burns scalds, and frostbites	0	2.29	-2.29
Drownings and asphyxiations	0	2.08	-2.08
Effects of sound vibration and pressure	0	0.4	-0.4
Shocks	0	2.03	-2.03
Multiple injuries	0	21.01	-21.01
Other and Unspecified	23.7	26.6	-2.9

Source: Our analysis based on Eurostat ESAW data for the year 2021.
Note: It covers work-related fatal accidents. Data includes road traffic accidents that happen in the course of work, but excludes commuting accidents between home and the workplace. The data reported in ESAW are based on official declarations submitted to public social security institutions, private insurance bodies, or other national authorities responsible for labour and workplace safety monitoring.

2 At the time of the analysis, 2021 was the most recent year for which data was available in Eurostat.

3 Also, we note that Italian official statistics only account for accidents that occur during work activities. They exclude incidents that happen during commutes between home and the workplace, as well as work-related illnesses. Additionally, these statistics do not cover accidents involving uninsured workers or those employed in the informal (or "grey") economy—an estimated workforce of over three million people.

While these reported data come from formal employment, some studies have used additional sources to also be able to cover also non-standard forms of employment. For instance, Campo et al (2020) examined 4,874 cases of fatal workplace accidents between 2002 and 2016 from the Infor.Mo database, an Italian national database designed to collect and analyze information on fatal occupational accidents, developed through a collaboration between the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work (INAIL) and the National Health Service (SSN). Although not systematically, this database may include fatalities occurring in informal or undeclared jobs, which are not covered by official statistics. Based on this data, Campo et al. find that a significant proportion of the victims were either self-employed (27.8%) or engaged in non-standard forms of employment, including pensioners, contributing family workers, and undocumented or precarious/fixed-term workers (25%). This highlights the heightened vulnerability of these worker categories. The study also reveals that micro-enterprises are disproportionately affected, with 18.4% of fatal accidents occurring in construction and 17.3% in agriculture—sectors often dominated by small businesses and characterized by high safety risks. In terms of how these fatalities occurred, Campo et al. (2020) identified falls from height or into holes as the leading cause, accounting for 33.5% of cases (1,635 incidents). This underscores the persistent danger of working at height, particularly in construction and agricultural settings. The second most common cause was being struck by falling heavy objects, responsible for 16.7% of deaths (814 cases), followed closely by vehicle-related incidents—specifically vehicles veering off course or overturning—which accounted for 15.9% (777 cases). Together, these three causes represent over two-thirds of all fatal accidents, highlighting critical areas where targeted prevention measures could significantly reduce fatalities.

To examine whether Italy shows sectoral differences in workplace fatality rates compared to the EU27 countries, we conducted a series of regression analyses on fatal accident rates by sector from 2013 to 2023, comparing Italy with each EU27 country using ILOSTAT data (see Appendix A for details on this source). This approach enabled us to control for potential confounding factors by applying a fixed-effects panel regression model (see Appendix C for further details). Our results (a summary of which is presented in Table 2) reveal that Italy has significantly higher fatal workplace accident rates in agriculture, forestry and fishing, mining and quarrying, construction, and transportation and storage compared to several EU countries. Specifically, Italy shows statistically significantly higher fatal workplace accident rates in agriculture, forestry, and fishing when compared to Belgium, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden. In the mining and quarrying sector, Italy's rates are significantly higher than those of Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Sweden. In the construction industry, Italy's fatal accident rate is higher than that of Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, and Sweden. Regarding transportation and storage, Italy exhibits higher fatal accident rates compared to Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden. In the sector classified as electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply, Italy performs better only than Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Romania.

These results highlight the significance of sector-specific risks in determining fatal workplace accident rates and suggest that Italy's elevated fatality rates in certain sectors, particularly agriculture, mining, and construction, warrant further policy attention. These findings may reflect challenges in sector-specific enforcement, differences in safety culture, or structural characteristics unique to the Italian labour market.

Table 2: Sectoral Differences in Fatal Workplace Accidents: Significant Disparities Between Italy and EU27 Countries

Industry	Countries with higher fatal workplace accident rates than Italy	Countries with lower fatal workplace accident rates than Italy
A. Agriculture; forestry and fishing	Austria (-27.405***); Ireland (-9.096***); Latvia (-10.874***); Lithuania (-6.329*); Luxembourg (-9.815***); Romania (-17.204***)	Belgium (5.157**); Croatia (3.039*); Finland (4.069**); Germany (6.682***); Greece (7.504***); Hungary (3.264**); Netherlands (8.597***); Poland (7.339***); Sweden (2.698**)
B. Mining and quarrying	Estonia (-7.411**); Latvia (-7.725**); Portugal (-14.950***); Spain (-11.817***)	Belgium (6.941***); Croatia (6.934***); Denmark (6.933***); Finland (5.738***); Germany (7.307***); Hungary (8.039***); Luxembourg (11.189***); Netherlands (9.518***); Slovakia (6.854***); Slovenia (10.899***); Sweden (8.603***)
D. Electricity; gas, steam and air conditioning supply	Bulgaria (-3.125**); Croatia (-4.479**); Estonia (-13.468***); Lithuania (-8.559**); Romania (-5.694***)	Netherlands (1.652*)
E. Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	Ireland (-6.126***); Romania (-5.187***)	Denmark (3.271**); Netherlands (2.648***)
F. Construction	Bulgaria (-5.615***); Croatia (-3.320*); Portugal (-6.275***); Romania (-5.708***)	Denmark (5.076***); Finland (4.600**); Germany (4.196***); Netherlands (6.606***); Poland (2.669**); Slovakia (2.687*); Sweden (5.176***)
H. Transportation and storage	Bulgaria (-4.219***); Latvia (-6.371*); Luxembourg (-7.939**); Romania (-5.273***)	Germany (3.034***); Greece (4.910**); Netherlands (4.964***); Poland (1.930*); Sweden (2.833**)
T. Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods- and services-producing activities of households for own use	France (-4.705*)	-

Significance code: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Source: Our analysis based on ILOSTAT Data 2013-2022 on fatal accidents rate per 100,000 workers by ISIN industrial sectors.
Note: Interaction Coefficient β4 (Italy x Sector) from Panel Regression of Fatal Workplace Accident Rates by Economic Sector (2013-2023), Italy vs. EU27 Countries (per 100,000 Workers). The dependent variable is each sectors are fatal workplace accident rate by economic sector per 100,000 workers (year 2013-2023). We run a separate regression of the subsample of Italy and another EU27 country. The rows report coefficient estimated for the interaction term of Italy and the sector. Where X. Not elsewhere classified is the baseline sector. Additional controls are "Log (GDP)", "Unemployment", "Share of Youth not Working and not in Education", "Bachelor Education", "Rule of Law", "Control of Corruption", "Regulatory Quality", "Year Dummy", and "Sector Dummy". The country-level variables come from the WorldBank open data database. Industries where Italy does not score as statistically different from any other EU27 countries are not listed.

Box: Gender and Economic Sectors

Looking at workplace fatalities across economic sectors and gender, Table B.1 shows that fatal workplace accident rates among female workers in Italy in 2021 occur at more than double the rate of the EU27 average (0.54 vs. 0.26), highlighting a significant gender-specific safety concern. Italy reports notably higher fatality rates in sectors such as agriculture (2.12 vs. 1.07), accommodation and food services (0.65 vs. 0.25), and administrative and support services (0.77 vs. 0.27). Most strikingly, the public administration and defence sector shows a fatality rate of 4.2 in Italy, compared to just 0.4 in the EU27, marking a dramatic 3.8-point difference. In contrast, several sectors either report no fatalities in Italy or lower rates than the EU average (e.g., construction and real estate). These results suggest that while fatal accidents among female workers are relatively rare overall, Italy faces disproportionately high risks in specific sectors, pointing to the need for targeted interventions, improved safety protocols, and gender-sensitive occupational safety strategies in those areas.

The large differences in the rate of women's fatal workplace accidents between Italy and the European average suggest the existence of Italy-specific structural differences between men and women in the workplace. In a recent study, Sorrentino et al. (2016) examined differences in occupational safety and health between women and men, highlighting that those differences in Italy originate from a strong gender-based segregation in the Italian labour market, with men and women often assigned to different sectors and roles. The nature of occupational segregation is twofold. On the one hand, horizontal segregation places men and women in traditionally "masculinized" or "feminized" job sectors, and even when performing the same job, they may be assigned different tasks. On the other hand, vertical segregation further places men in higher rank positions within workplace hierarchies, while women are often in lower-paid roles with limited decision-making power. As a result, men are more exposed to long working hours, physically demanding labour, noise, and technical tasks, particularly in industries like mining, construction, and agriculture. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to hold part-time or temporary contracts and work in care, service, or small enterprise roles. This segregation plays a significant role in creating unequal exposure to occupational risks and may also contribute to the underreporting of workplace accidents involving women, potentially obscuring the full extent of their vulnerability in the workplace.

Table B1: Fatal workplace accident rate by economic sector for female workers per 100,000 workers (year 2021)

Industry ISIN	Average Italy	Average EU27	Difference Italy-EU27
Total	**0.54**	**0.26**	**0.28**
A. Agriculture, forestry, and fishing	2.12	1.07	1.05
B. Mining and quarrying	0	0	0
C. Manufacturing	0.37	0.26	0.11
D. Electricity: gas, steam, and air conditioning supply	0	0	0
E. Water supply: sewerage, waste management, and remediation activities	0	0	0
F. Construction	0	0.43	-0.43
G. Wholesale and retail trade repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	0.31	0.25	0.06
H. Transportation and storage	0.44	0.64	-0.2
I. Accommodation and food service activities	0.65	0.25	0.4
J. Information and communication	0	0.14	-0.14
K. Financial and insurance activities	0	0.18	-0.18
L. Real estate activities	0	0.52	-0.52
M. Professional, scientific, and technical activities	0.15	0.13	0.02
N. Administrative and support service activities	0.77	0.27	0.5
O. Public administration and defence compulsory social security	4.2	0.4	3.8
P. Education	0.08	0.03	0.05
Q. Human health and social work activities	0.3	0.22	0.08
R. Arts, entertainment, and recreation	0	0.39	-0.39
S. Other service activities	0.23	0.1	0.13
T. Activities of households as employers undifferentiated goods-and services-producing activities of households for own use	0	0.14	-0.14
U. Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies	0	0	0

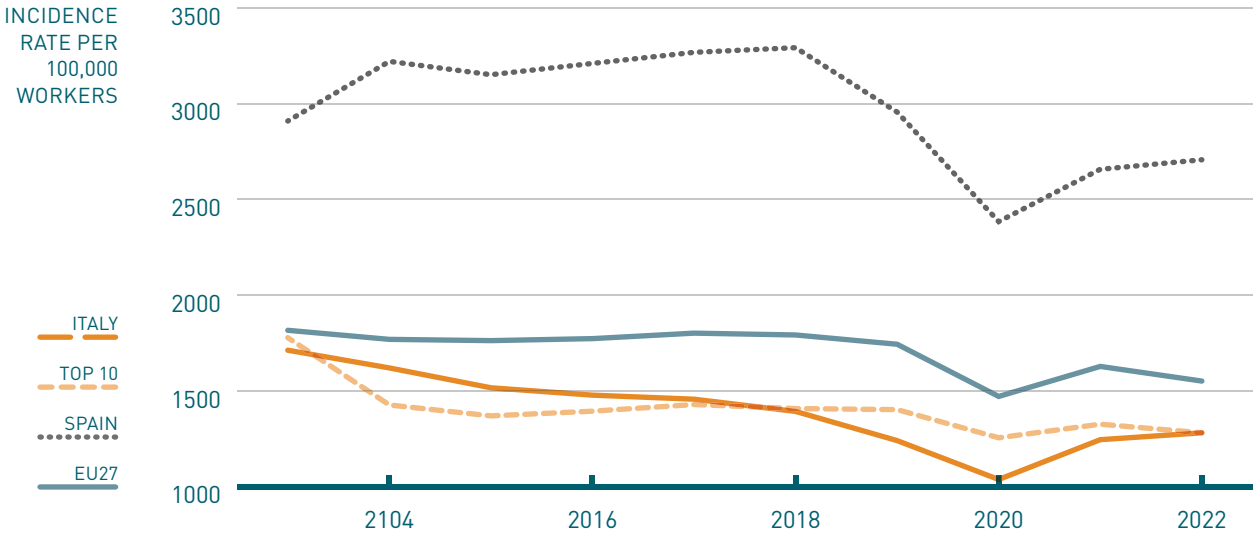
Source: Our analysis based on Eurostat ESAW data.

Non-fatal workplace accidents

Turning our focus to non-fatal workplace accidents, it is important to note that Italy's data in this area may be significantly underreported. Previous research has raised concerns about the underreporting of non-fatal accidents in Italy, which could be attributed to both systemic and cultural factors, as well as limited oversight by supervisory agencies compared to other EU27 countries (Paraciani 2023, Paraciani and Rizza 2019). Unlike fatal accidents, which are far less likely to go unreported, non-fatal accidents often escape official records, leading to striking discrepancies between the two sets of data (Antonelli et al., 2024).

As shown in Figure 5, Italy's standardized incidence rate for non-fatal workplace accidents appears lower than the EU27 average throughout the decade observed (2013–2022). However, this figure strikes given the higher incidence of fatal accidents reported above and should therefore be interpreted with caution. Non-fatal accident rates are influenced by various factors, including differences in reporting practices, legal definitions, and compensation systems across countries. Moreover, the structure of the national labor market—such as the prevalence of temporary or informal work—further complicates the comparison of non-fatal accident rates between countries. While this indicator provides some insight into workplace safety trends, it may not accurately reflect the true scale of non-fatal accidents, particularly when considering these systemic and cultural variations. Therefore, while Italy's figures may suggest a relatively lower incidence of non-fatal accidents, the actual situation could be far more concerning.

Figure 5: Standardized incidence rate of non-fatal workplace accidents per 100,000 workers



Source: Our analysis based on Eurostat ESAW data.
Note: The rate is adjusted for the relative sizes of economic sectors at the EU level. The data includes the NACE sectors of agriculture, industry, and construction (except mining), and services of the business economy. Non-fatal accidents include workplace accidents with a severity of 4 days or over. EU27 represents the weighted average for the European Union in 2020, as calculated by Eurostat. Top10 are among the EU27 countries, those in the top 10% for best performance in workplace accident rates across sectors for the whole period, and include Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

Conclusions

The analysis of Italy's occupational health and safety landscape—marked by persistently high fatal workplace accident rates despite a robust legal framework—reveals profound systemic challenges that go beyond regulatory compliance. At its core, the evolution of occupational health and safety from a matter of statutory adherence to one of human rights exposes not only Italy's shortcomings but also offers a broader, cautionary narrative on the disconnect between legal commitments and lived workplace realities.

What emerges from the data is a fundamental paradox: Italy possesses a comprehensive legal framework for workplace safety in Europe. Yet, the country continues to record fatality rates consistently above the EU27 average. This contradiction points to an issue of implementation failure. A framework, no matter how advanced, becomes ineffective without enforcement, resources, and a culture that prioritizes prevention and accountability.

The human rights framing, as emphasized by the UNGPs, elevates workplace safety to a moral and legal imperative. Under this lens, occupational fatalities and injuries are not mere accidents; they are violations of basic rights, including the right to life and health. Italy's failure to adequately protect workers, particularly in high-risk sectors and vulnerable employment categories, therefore constitutes a breach of these international obligations.

The specific Italian context reveals several troubling patterns. Firstly, the fatality rate among workers in sectors like agriculture and construction, often characterized by informal employment, weak oversight, and high physical risk, is alarmingly high. Data from Campo et al. (2020) also illustrates that micro-enterprises and self-employed or non-standard workers account for a significant share of workplace deaths. Additionally, gender disparities in workplace safety appear to indicate the need to for a deeper scrutiny of occupational segregation. The Eurostat data show that female workers in Italy face higher fatality rates in several sectors. Sorrentino et al. (2016) attribute this to entrenched horizontal and vertical segregation, which funnels women into under-protected jobs.

Furthermore, the persistent underreporting of workplace accidents—particularly among migrant workers and those in the informal economy—significantly distorts the true scale of the problem. With over three million people estimated to work in Italy's "grey" economy, according to 2021 ISTAT estimates, many workplace injuries and deaths remain invisible to public statistics and policy action. This invisibility perpetuates a system of impunity and erodes trust in institutions tasked with upholding labour rights.

The failure of enforcement mechanisms looms large in this discussion. The UN Working Group's 2021 critique of Italy highlights deficiencies in labour inspections, inadequate provision of personal protective equipment, and insufficient safeguards for vulnerable workers. These gaps render legislative protections ineffective and contribute to a workplace culture that devalues human life. Strengthening labour inspections, increasing penalties for non-compliance, and expanding training and awareness initiatives are essential steps to close the enforcement gap.

Equally important is the cultural dimension of occupational safety. Anecdotal evidence—such as the widely reported case of Luana D'Orazio, among many others—suggests that safety is, at times, treated more as a bureaucratic obligation than as a core organizational value. A shift in mindset is urgently needed: one that recognizes workers not merely as labour inputs, but as rights-holders entitled to a safe and dignified working environment. This cultural transformation entails embedding safety into the day-to-day practices of organizations, empowering workers to raise concerns without fear of retaliation, integrating safety into management systems, and fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

Corporate accountability also plays a central role. Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, companies are expected to conduct human rights due diligence—assessing, preventing, and mitigating potential harms across their operations and supply chains. In the Italian context, where a significant share of fatal accidents occur within subcontracted or outsourced work, this responsibility becomes particularly critical. Employers must be held accountable not only for the safety of their direct employees, but also for all workers within their broader operational sphere, including those in informal or precarious arrangements.

From a policy perspective, addressing Italy's workplace safety challenge will require a comprehensive, multipronged strategy. This includes not only stricter enforcement and monitoring, but also incentive structures that reward companies for responsible practices and measurable reductions in workplace fatalities (Giuliani, 2024). Ultimately, elevating workplace safety must become a shared societal goal—embedded in corporate governance, supported by public policy, and reinforced by a culture that values human life above all else.

In conclusion, despite formal alignment with European and international standards, the persistent occurrence of fatal workplace accidents, particularly in vulnerable sectors, coupled with shortcomings in respect to the implementation of occupational health and safety management measures, in training, as well as in the effectiveness of inspection activities, underscors a significant implementation gap. This gap points to a structural problem of the national legal system in respect to the application of norms and standards enshrined in International and regional treaties applicable to the subject-matter, such as the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the CoE European Social Charter, and the relevant ILO conventions. Addressing these critical issues requires more than technical adjustments: it demands to Italian authorities for urgent and targeted measures to be adopted in order to improve health and safety conditions at work and to safeguard the rights of workers.

Appendix A: Data sources

A.1. Eurostat ESAW

The statistics presented are based on Eurostat data collected as part of the administrative data collection exercise for European statistics on workplace accidents (ESAW- European Statistics on Accidents at Work).

The statistics on workplace accidents provided by Eurostat are based on reports submitted either to public bodies (such as social security administrations), private insurance schemes, or other relevant national authorities (for example, agencies responsible for labour or workplace inspections). The main available indicators are presented as absolute numbers, percentage distributions, incidence rates per 100,000 employed persons , or as standardised incidence rates. In our analysis, we focused on incidence rates and standardized incidence rates to allow a better comparison.

Data on incidence rates are defined as the ratio between (i) the number of accidents (non-fatal or fatal for a given year, country, sector, sex, age group or other breakdowns) and (ii) the corresponding number of employed persons (reference population) multiplied by 100,000 and cover all economic activities. However, given that accident rates vary across different NACE activities— with higher risks observed in agriculture, forestry and fishing, manufacturing, and construction—implying that countries with a larger proportion of high-risk economic activities tend to have higher accident incidence rates, even when safety measures are comparable. The standardized incidence rate follows a standardization process to improve comparability between national datasets. This process employs direct standardisation with weights derived from a European reference population, representing the share of the workforce in each NACE activity. National incidence rates are calculated separately for each activity and then combined using a fixed set of EU weights to generate an overall standardized incidence rate for each country. However, the standardized incidence rate systematically excludes the mining sector.

As a cautionary note, we should remark that workplace accident statistics may be affected by under-coverage or under-reporting, and the extent of the problem varies from country to country. Moreover, difficulties in country to country comparison may also arise from changes in national data collection and processing methods that affect the recorded number and incidence of workplace accidents in a given year. For instance, on 30 June 2016, several EU countries saw the expiry of derogations from certain ESAW regulation requirements, significantly impacting the 2014 data. That year, France included, for the first time, complete coverage of employees across all economic sectors from NACE Sections A to S, resulting in a notable increase in reported accidents compared to 2013. Similarly, Belgium expanded its coverage in 2014 to include public sector accidents, leading to a rise in reported figures. In Greece, methodological corrections led to the removal of certain adjustment factors in 2016, causing a sharp drop in the number of reported accidents for 2014, with expectations of more complete data in future years likely increasing reported accident numbers. Meanwhile, both Dutch and Norwegian data for non-fatal accidents in 2014 showed significant decreases due to methodological changes (note that Norwegian data are not included in the EU total).

The ESAW data are based on case-by-case data for workplace accidents that result in more than three days of absence from work or in the death of the victim. A workplace accident is defined as an isolated event occurring during work activity that causes physical or mental harm.

The following are excluded from the statistics:

- Commuting accidents: incidents occurring during the regular commute to and from home and the workplace.
- Self-inflicted injuries: deliberately caused by the victim.
- Accidents caused by strictly natural causes.
- Private accidents: unrelated to work activity.
- Accidents involving members of the public, even if related to workplace activity within a company.

A fatal workplace accident is defined as an accident resulting in the victim's death within one year of the incident. In practice, the reporting of a fatal accident depends on national registration procedures, which determine how the accident is recorded as fatal.

The definition of variables is outlined in Commission Regulation (EU) No. 349/2011 and further specified in the methodology at ESAW.

A.2 ILOSTAT

We use ILOSTAT occupational and health statistics (OHS) data for the sectoral analysis. ILOSTAT provides statistics on both fatal and non-fatal occupational injuries. To assess the occupational risks workers are exposed to, ILOSTAT offers data on the number of fatal and non-fatal occupational injury cases per 100,000 workers, disaggregated by gender and economic activity, collected from national sources.

An occupational injury is defined as any personal injury, disease, or death resulting from a workplace accident. Occupational injuries differ from occupational diseases, which are illnesses contracted due to prolonged exposure to risk factors associated with work activities. A work-related accident is an unexpected and unplanned event, including acts of violence, that occurs during or in connection with work and results in one or more workers sustaining injuries, diseases, or fatalities. An occupational injury case refers to a worker who has suffered an injury as a result of a workplace accident.

An occupational injury can be fatal if death occurs within one year of the accident, or non-fatal, leading to a loss of work time. Work incapacity is the inability of a worker, due to an occupational injury, to perform their normal job duties at the position held at the time of the accident. Incapacity can be permanent when the injured worker is never able to return to their normal job duties, or temporary when the injured worker is unable to work from the day following the accident but later recovers and resumes their normal duties within one year of the incident.

The reference worker group covered by occupational injury statistics refers to the workers included in the reporting system. This typically includes workers in establishments or economic activities subject to national legislation or regulatory reporting requirements. Lost workdays due to temporary incapacity refer to the total number of calendar days during which temporarily incapacitated individuals were unable to work, excluding the day of the accident, up to a maximum of one year. Temporary absences for medical treatment lasting less than a day are not included.

For more detailed information, refer to the Resolution concerning statistics of occupational injuries (resulting from workplace accidents), adopted by the 16th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (October 1998).

Appendix B: Occupational diseases

This section presents an overview of recent trends in occupational diseases in Italy, based on data from the INAIL Annual Report 2022 and the INAIL OpenData portal. The analysis covers the period from 2019 to 2023, drawing on administrative records related to reported cases of work-related illnesses. These data have not been included in the comparative analyses of this document because of lack of comparable EU27 data over time. These data provide crucial insights into the evolution of occupational health risks, the impact of systemic factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and the burden of chronic occupational diseases, like asbestosis and silicosis.

According to INAIL OpenData, the number of reported occupational diseases increased in 2022, continuing the upward trend over the period of observation with the exception of a drop in 2020, allegedly due to the Covid-19 pandemic's disruption of reporting and diagnostic activities (Modenese and Gobba, 2020). In 2022, nearly 61,000 cases of occupational diseases were reported—a 9.9% increase compared to 2021, and only 0.9% below the pre-pandemic level of 2019, which saw over 61,000 cases. In 2023, the number of registered occupational diseases increased further with more than 72,000 cases protocolled; among those, 42% of reported occupational disease cases have been officially recognized as work-related (see Table A.1).

Table A.1: Cases of occupational diseases by protocol year and gender

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
F	16,647	12,060	14,875	15,880	19,113
M	44,552	32,889	40,325	44,745	53,474
Total	**61,199**	**44,949**	**55,200**	**60,625**	**72,587**

Source: INAIL OpenData. Data of occupational diseases refers to the year in which the diseased was registered.

Among the most severe and long-latency occupational illnesses, asbestosis and silicosis remain significant concerns. In 2022, 1,007 workers died with recognized work-related asbestosis and silicosis (Table A.2).

Table A.2: Deceased workers with recognition of occupational disease for possible Silicosis Asbestosis by gender and year of death

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Asbestosis F	48	37	43	34	24
Asbestosis M	987	932	824	763	682
Asbestosis Total	1035	969	867	797	706
Silicosis F	8	9	4	3	8
Silicosis M	264	255	205	207	159
Silicosis Total	272	264	209	210	167
Total Asbestosis/Silicosis	**1037**	**1233**	**1076**	**1007**	**873**

Source: INAIL OpenData

Appendix C: Regression analysis

For each subsample of Italy and an EU27 country sectoral panel data 2013-2022 we estimated the following panel regression model:

$$\textit{Fatal accident rate} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 \cdot \textit{Italy} + \beta_3 \cdot \textit{sector} + \beta_4 \cdot (\textit{Italy} \times \textit{sector}) + \beta_5 \cdot \textit{controls} + \beta_6 \cdot \textit{time dummy} + \varepsilon$$

where the dependent variable is the fatal accident rate per 100,000 workers in sector i, country c, and year t.

Italy is a binary indicator equal to one for observations from Italy and zero otherwise. *Sector* represents a full set of sectoral dummies. Our main variable of interest is the interaction term, β4, between the Italy dummy and the sectoral dummies. This coefficient captures whether fatal accident rates in Italy differ significantly from those of other countries within specific sectors. Additional controls include country-specific time-varying variables based on World Bank data. These include per capita income, unemployment rate, and the share of youth neither in employment nor in education, as these factors can influence workplace safety and the size of the informal labour market. We also include measures of educational attainment, given the established link between education levels and workplace safety—both through knowledge effects and occupational sorting. Finally, we incorporate institutional controls such as the rule of law, control of corruption, and regulatory quality, which may influence both the enforcement of workplace safety regulations and the likelihood of accident reporting. The full regression analyses for the countries are available upon request. In this Insights piece we only report the results when statistically significant.

REFERENCES

Antonelli, M. A., Castaldo, A., Forti, M., Marrocco, A., and Salustri, A. (2024). Workplace accidents, economic determinants and underreporting: an empirical analysis in Italy. *International Journal of Manpower*, 45(8), 1555-1572.

Campo, G., Cegolon, L., De Merich, D., Fedeli, U., Pellicci, M., Heymann, W. C., and Mastrangelo, G. (2020). The Italian national surveillance system for occupational injuries: Conceptual framework and fatal outcomes, 2002–2016. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(20), 7631.

Fabiano, B., Currò, F., and Pastorino, R. (2004). A study of the relationship between occupational injuries and firm size and type in the Italian industry. *Safety Science*, 42(7), 587-600.

Giuliani, E. (2024) Making it right: socio-environmental conditionalities in regional industrial policies, *Progress in Economic Geography*, 2 (1); https://doi.org/10.1016/j.peg.2024.100007

Modenese, A., and Gobba, F. (2020). Increased Risk of COVID-19-Related Deaths among General Practitioners in Italy. *Healthcare*, 8(2), 155. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare8020155

Paraciani, R. (2023). Labour Inspectors in Italy: Between Discretion and Institutional Pressure. Springer Nature.

Paraciani, R., and Rizza, R. (2021). When the workplace is the home: labour inspectors' discretionary power in the field of domestic work – an institutional analysis. *Journal of Public Policy*, 41(1), 1–16. doi:10.1017/S0143814X19000254

Sorrentino, E., Vona, R., Monterosso, D., and Giammarioli, A. M. (2016). Gender issues on occupational safety and health. *Annali dell'Istituto Superiore di Sanità*, 52(2), 190-197.

REBALANCE
DEMOCRACY
& CAPITALISM

CONTACT US:
Elisa Giuliani
Dipartimento Economia & Management
Università di Pisa
Via Ridolfi 10 - 56124 Pisa; Italy

elisa.giuliani@unipi.it

https://rebalanceproject.org

Funded by
the European Union

Grant n. 101061342

Università di Pisa · Hertie School · Stockholms universitet · Università Ca'Foscari Venezia · University of Bath · Wageningen University & Research · source