



3F Trade Union

**The experience of working with migrant precarity in the Danish
construction industry.**



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ABSTRACT

This master's thesis critically examines the role of the 3F Trade Union in addressing the precarious employment conditions of migrant construction workers in Denmark, particularly in light of Denmark's increasing reliance on migrant labor within its construction sector. This sector has experienced significant growth, driven by economic expansion and facilitated by the broader context of labor mobility within the European Union. The study takes on the perspective of 3F union professionals who have extensive work experience within the construction industry in Denmark. This thesis addresses the issue of precarity within this sector from a new perspective, that of 3F professionals. This perspective is highly relevant in that it complements the body of research conducted within this sector that has focused on the experiences of the migrant workers themselves. The study delves into the complexities of regulatory frameworks and institutional practices and meanings that shape the work environment of these workers, as they are experienced within the 3F trade union, one of the most important advocates for the rights and welfare of construction workers in Denmark.

The thesis employs a comprehensive literature review to establish the context of migrant labor precarity, highlighting how economic, social, and legal factors converge to create uniquely challenging conditions for these workers. It emphasizes the significant role played by the 3F Trade Union in navigating these challenges through collective bargaining efforts, which aim to secure better wages and working conditions. However, the literature also exposes gaps in protection, particularly regarding the absence of a statutory minimum wage in Denmark, which places a greater burden on union negotiations to safeguard worker welfare.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing narrative interviewing to gather insights from 3F union professionals. These interviews, analyzed through thematic analysis, are grounded in social constructivism and hermeneutics. This approach not only captures the subjective perceptions and experiences of union professionals but also sheds light on the ways these perceptions can influence and co-create the broader socio-economic and cultural dynamics within their interactions with migrant workers and within their collaboration with other relevant institutions.

The findings reveal a nuanced understanding of how union professionals perceive and tackle the issues faced by migrant workers. While there is strong awareness and proactive efforts regarding economic exploitation and the need for better wage negotiations, discursively there is less attention paid to other critical aspects of precarity such as inadequate housing, workplace safety, health, and discrimination. This suggests a potential misalignment between unions' strategies and priorities and the holistic needs of the workers, indicating that economic factors often overshadow other vital dimensions of worker welfare.

Furthermore, the thesis uncovers perceptual biases and barriers among union professionals that may hinder effective advocacy for migrant rights. Some professionals display a resigned attitude toward systemic challenges, potentially limiting the union's capacity to advocate comprehensively for policy changes or to innovate in protective strategies. This resignation is critical as it could affect the union's ability to fully protect migrant workers under Danish employment standards.

The analysis argues for a broader reevaluation of union strategies to address the multifaceted nature of precarity more effectively. Recommendations include strengthening the union's approach to non-economic aspects of labor conditions, enhancing cultural competence within the union, and fostering better collaborations with institutional partners to ensure comprehensive protection against exploitation and exclusion.

In conclusion, the thesis underscores the need for a more integrated approach in trade union strategies, one that not only focuses on economic issues but also robustly addresses the social and legal challenges contributing to the precarious conditions of migrant workers. It advocates for policy shifts and practice reforms that can accommodate the complexities of modern labor markets, aiming to ensure a fair and equitable working environment for all workers, particularly those most vulnerable.

This study contributes valuable insights into the dynamics of labor rights advocacy within Denmark's construction industry, providing a robust foundation for future research and policy interventions aimed at reducing labor precarity. Through its empirical data and thorough analysis, it offers practical recommendations for enhancing union effectiveness and improving the protections available to migrant construction workers in Denmark.

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1. Introduction

In 2023, Denmark achieved a historic milestone, reaching an employment level of over 3 million workers, as reported by Statistics Denmark (2024). This period of continuous economic advancement, coupled with the European Union's enlargements in 2004 and 2007, has positioned Denmark as an attractive destination for employment among individuals from the newly inducted EU countries. These expansions have been attractive to migrant workers due to the comparative advantage of higher wages offered in Denmark against the backdrop of lower earnings in their home countries (Andersen & Felbo-Kolding, 2013) (Colombini, 2021). As a result, there has been a significant migration of workers seeking opportunities within sectors notorious for offering 3D jobs - dirty, dangerous, and demanding (sometimes degrading or demeaning) (Moyce & Schenker, 2018, p. 352). Often, these migrant workers, primarily unskilled, find themselves in the least paid positions, subjected to physically demanding tasks and worse working conditions compared to Danish workers. (Arnholtz & Hansen, 2009) (COWI, 2012; Refslund, 2021).

At the same time, a marked increase has been observed in the influx of migrant workers into the construction sector, acknowledged for its inherent risks (Nielsen, 2007) as one of the most fatal industries in Denmark along with the agricultural sector. (Arbejdstilsynet, 2020b) This influx of migrant workers, particularly evident in the construction industry where their numbers soared from 7,930 to 22,678 over a decade (Jobindsats, 2024), highlights their critical contribution to the sector's expansion. This growth is significantly attributed to workers from newer EU member states, such as Poland, Romania, and Lithuania, (Jobindsats, 2024). illustrating their essential role in addressing labor shortages and fueling the industry's development. The burgeoning presence of these workers not only emphasizes their value but also casts a spotlight on the urgent need to improve their working conditions and ensure their safety. This need is crucial for maintaining the sector's ongoing success and underscores the importance of safeguarding migrant workers' welfare (Overgård, et al., 2023)

1.1. 3F Trade Union

A critical player in the construction industry is the 3F trade union, Denmark's largest and most influential union. The union actively works to secure better wages and working conditions for its members through collective bargaining. The influence of 3F is particularly significant in the construction sector, where the lack of a statutory minimum wage makes collective agreements crucial. (3F, n.d.)

3F's activities include negotiating comprehensive collective agreements, which cover wages, working conditions, pensions, and other employment-related stipulations. The union also provides practical support to its members, including assistance with unemployment benefits, health and safety advice, and free wage and benefits checks. The union's efforts extend to the European level, where it advocates for the protection of workers' rights in the context of the EU's free movement of labor. (3F, n.d.)

1.2. Regulatory and institutional framework

Denmark's construction industry operates within a regulatory and institutional framework designed to ensure safety, health, and fair labor conditions, significantly influenced by both national legislation and EU directives. Central to this framework is The Working Environment Act (Arbejdsmiljøloven), which mandates creating specific Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) cooperation within companies, based on the size of the company, ensuring ongoing dialogue on safety issues (Overgård, et al., 2023, p. 12). This act underscores employers' responsibility for maintaining a safe working environment and requires employee involvement.

The Danish Working Environment Authority (Arbejdstilsynet) enforces these regulations, conducting inspections and providing guidance on compliance. This agency's role includes overseeing adherence to safety regulations and promoting best practices within the industry. The incorporation of EU Directives into Danish law helps alignment with European standard, in areas like - building codes, health and safety, worker mobility across the EU, promoting green, sustainable building practices,- and it leads to

collaboration in creating a robust legal framework showing a commitment to sustainability as well as compliance (European Commission, 2024).

Additionally, Denmark is experiencing political focus on the working environment of migrants, seeking to combat social-dumping, labor crime and illegal labor. (Arbejdstilsynet, 2023). This is partly due to the role that the media plays in relating cases of abuse, unfair treatment, and human rights violations (Overgård, et al., 2023).

The regulatory framework for the construction sector in Denmark relies on the active participation of various stakeholders, including employers, construction companies, employees, trade unions, and professional associations.

Employers and construction companies are primarily responsible for compliance with OHS regulations and implementing safety measures on construction sites (Overgård, et al., 2023). Employees and their trade unions contribute to shaping OHS practices and advocate for workers' rights. The Danish Construction Association (Dansk Byggeri, 2024), representing employers, and trade unions like 3F-The United Federation of Danish Workers (Fagligt Fælles Forbund), exemplify collaboration through collective bargaining agreements that often include advanced safety protocols and training programs.

Employees and their trade unions are not just passive recipients of safety measures but active participants in shaping OHS practices. The Danish Construction Association, representing employers, and trade unions like 3F and the United Federation of Danish Workers, exemplify collaboration through collective bargaining agreements that often include advanced safety protocols and training programs (Dansk Industri, 2023).

Professional associations such as the trade unions and advisory bodies play a consultative role, offering expertise on everything from technical standards to best practices in project management. Their contributions are vital in developing the comprehensive guidelines that help small and medium-sized enterprises navigate the complex regulatory landscape.

The collaboration among stakeholders is defined by a blend of regulatory compliance, voluntary initiatives, and collective action. This interplay is facilitated by a regulatory environment that encourages stakeholder engagement in safety and health matters, demonstrating a co-regulation model where governmental oversight is complemented by industry self-regulation.

Denmark's construction industry is characterized by a comprehensive regulatory and institutional framework meant to prioritize safety, health, and environmental stewardship (Green Building Council Denmark) supported by a complex network of stakeholders committed to continuous improvement. The dynamics of their collaboration, exemplified by joint initiatives and a shared commitment to excellence, underscore the industry's efforts for adaptability and resilience in the face of the neo-liberal global competitiveness.

1.3. Problem Formulation

What do 3F professionals experience when working with the Danish construction industry and how do they perceive these experiences?

1.4. Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the work experiences and perceptions of 3F professionals activating within the construction industry branch of the 3F trade union. This topic is one of great interest as it seeks to capture a view of an industry marked by precarity, injustices and illegal practices (Overgård, et al., 2023) from the perspective of a trade union, an institution that is meant to be defending the rights of workers. The precarious existence of migrant workers in this sector has been a problem for many years, and it continues to be one, despite the union's constant efforts. Therefore, looking at the 3F union's perspective on the work they are doing, can result in unearthing possible blind spots that hinder their progress in combatting precarity.

2. Literature review

This section provides an overview of the existing literature on the topic of precarity and more specifically on the topic of precarity in the Danish construction industry as well as detailing the role of the 3F trade union and a final section presenting how the 3F professionals interviewed for the purpose of this paper, their views and perceptions are equated to the 3F organization itself.

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss migrant precarity, its persistence in the construction industry in Denmark, to describe institutional dynamics that lead to precarity, and to explore the views that have led to the specific format of this research.

2.1. Precarity in the context of migrant construction workers in Denmark

The issue of precarity among migrant workers in the Danish construction sector is now a longstanding and well-researched topic. It reached a critical juncture with the publication of "Migrants' work environment in the Danish construction sector," a comprehensive report produced by Aalborg University in 2023 (Overgård, et al., 2023). This comprehensive work discusses how last ten years have seen almost a threefold increase in the employment of migrant construction workers in full-time positions within the industry confirming the significant role of migrant labor in Denmark's construction sector and the critical need for policy interventions and initiatives. These should be aimed at improving migrant's employment conditions, thereby ensuring their contribution continues under conditions of financial and social stability, health and safety at the workplace, respecting their rights and dignity.

The "Migrant's work environment in the Danish construction sector" (2023) report, shows how in the context of the Danish construction industry, the experiences of migrant workers are shaped by a

complex interplay of employment conditions and the characteristics of the companies that employ them. This nuanced landscape reveals varying degrees of precarity that are influenced by factors such as job security, the nature of employment contracts, wage levels, access to social protections, and adherence to safety standards. The categorization of workers based on their country of origin—distinguishing between those from newer EU countries, older EU/Western countries, and non-EU countries—further complicates this scenario, as it introduces differentiated layers of vulnerability and integration challenges within the workforce.

The situation is most dire for migrant workers from non-EU countries who are bound by stricter immigration and work permit regulations. These regulations, coupled with the often temporary or seasonal nature of their employment, position them at the highest risk of exploitation, characterized by lower wages, limited access to social benefits, and exposure to hazardous working conditions. The employment status—whether full-time, temporary, or on a contractual basis—significantly influences the degree of job security and access to labor rights, with temporary and part-time workers shown to face the brunt of precarity (Overgård, et al., 2023), likely only surpassed by irregular migrants, and people whose work and residency permits have been revoked. (Standing G. , 2014)

The role of the employing companies, whether Danish or foreign owned, cannot be overstated in its impact on the work environment of migrant construction workers. Companies that strictly adhere to Danish labor laws and safety regulations typically provide a more secure and safe working environment. In contrast, foreign-owned entities, or those with lax attitudes towards labor rights may contribute to the vulnerability of their migrant workforce. The practice of subcontracting further muddies the waters of accountability, often leading to a dilution of responsibility for labor rights and safety standards across the industry. This layered employment structure not only amplifies the challenges faced by migrant workers but also calls into question the efficacy of existing regulatory frameworks and institutional dynamics that are meant to protect this segment of the workforce (Overgård, et al., 2023).

2.2. Migrants' work environment in the Danish construction sector

Identified problem areas:

This literature review section describes the complex web of precarious conditions that significantly impact migrant construction workers in Denmark. This analysis draws from the “Migrants’ work environment in the Danish Construction sector” (Overgård, et al., 2023) report, which meticulously documents the many challenges these workers face, presenting a detailed picture of the systemic issues within the industry.

Economic Vulnerability is a critical issue highlighted by the report, where migrant workers often find themselves compelled to accept lower wages, substandard safety conditions and prolonged working hours in exchange for financial stability. The exploitation of vulnerabilities is illustrated by their willingness to compromise on safety for the sake of economic gain, with the report noting, “*Migrant workers are willing to accept (even much) lower safety standards if there is sufficient financial benefit*” (Guldenmund et al., 2013) seeing as “...migrants have to work more hours than Danes to achieve the same earnings”. This willingness is further exacerbated by their precarious position in the labor market, they fear for their jobs and have difficulty saying no when faced with demands from the employer, they take on higher risk work without the proper safety equipment, partly due to language barriers and insufficient instruction on the Danish safety procedures. Such economic pressures not only undermine their safety but also lead to a reluctance to report unsafe conditions or injuries, fearing job loss or reprisals, which significantly contributes to the *Underreporting of Accidents*. The underreporting, for which employers are responsible, is highlighted as systemic. Employers hide accidents “*This is done, for example, by various forms of pressure on the worker to continue working, by repatriation, by ignoring injuries and preventing professional medical treatment and/or dismissal.*” (Overgård, et al., 2023) perpetuating a cycle of unaddressed risks and ongoing worker endangerment.

Workplace Safety and Health Risks are particularly pronounced due to the lack of proper safety measures and adequate training, placing migrant workers at a higher risk of accidents and injuries. The report also emphasizes the relative failure of health and safety cooperation to influence the working

environment of migrant workers, given that introductory courses seem to only be “a *formality that just needs to be completed*” (Overgård, et al., 2023, p. 137) Furthermore, the study data suggests that “*health and safety organization is either not working at all on some sites and/or that migrants are being left out of this organization*” (Overgård, et al., 2023, p. 138) , which can be followed back to the perceptions on cultural differences. The study concludes that if cultural differences regarding health and safety at the place of work exist, they seem to benefit the employer. In other words, when migrant workers choose a high pace of work, while performing dangerous tasks, without the necessary safety measures they are rewarded instead of being instructed in the ways of the Danish construction industry. This failure of safety infrastructure is intricately linked to their economic vulnerabilities and is often influenced by their inability to communicate safety concerns effectively, leading to persistent safety risks. The study also shows that even though workers seem to perceive the Danish Working Environment Authority as “*an ally in the protection of workers' rights*”, their visits stop the work on construction sites and workers disappear. The consensus is that migrants are being ordered to stop their work and make themselves scarce. (Biering, et al., 2017) (Overgård, et al., 2023).

As it follows, prolonged working hours, dangerous fast paced work done at the expense of proper safety measures, result in higher risk of accidents, physical and mental health issues.

“...research shows that long working hours have a negative impact on general health (Chu, 2021), more days of absence from work (Peutere et al., 2021) and cardiovascular and musculoskeletal problems and accidents (Ervasti et al., 2021). The Danish Working Environment Authority also lists some signs: difficulty concentrating, memory problems, lack of overview, reduced mood and increased irritability, feeling professionally inadequate, social isolation, lack of energy and sleep problems (Arbejdstilsynet, 2023).” (Overgård, et al., 2023, p. 111)

The issue of *Inadequate Housing* provided by employers often ties directly to employment conditions, creating not only a dependency that can be exploited but also affecting migrant workers' overall well-being. This precarious housing situation, where many workers live together in sub-par conditions, feeds into the broader theme of *Social Isolation*. Migrant workers face significant challenges in integrating into social and professional networks. The Overgaard et al. (2023) report explains that migrant workers experience social isolation due to cultural and language barriers, as well as pay discrimination, lower safety standards, more dangerous tasks, less equipment, longer working hours at a fast pace and with

fewer breaks, as compared to their Danish colleagues. This hinders their integration into workplace communities and limits their possibility of being part of communities outside of work. This isolation compounded by *Language and Cultural Barriers* that limit their ability to communicate effectively, create alliances, advocate for themselves, navigate safety protocols, and understand their rights within a Danish workplace. (Overgård, et al., 2023)

Each of these conditions does not exist in isolation but rather interacts with and exacerbates the others, creating a multifaceted web of vulnerability that impacts nearly every aspect of a migrant worker's life in the construction industry. These problem areas identified by the Overgaard et al. (2023) report are indicators of precarity, as they represent an infringement of human rights, on one of the groups defined by Standing as being part of the precariat, namely- migrants. (Standing G. , 2014)

2.3. Precarity institutionalized

Precarity, generally understood, emerges from a confluence of economic, social, and policy factors that lead to insecure and unstable employment conditions. The competitive force required by neoliberal globalization and technological advancements have led to flexibilization of labor markets, decline of unions, and required economic policy shifts favoring the flexible labor practices. (Kalleberg, 2008) (Goldring, Berinstein, & Bernhard, 2007).

To be competitive under neoliberalism, corporations have been seeking to reduce costs, including labor costs, by outsourcing jobs to regions with cheaper labour, such as India (Kalleberg, 2008) or by adopting flexible labour agendas in higher-cost regions, often involving the employment of migrant workers. This has precipitated the rise of precarious employment in higher-cost regions, partly because migrants do not benefit from the same rights as native citizens. (Jørgensen & Floros, 2020) (Kalleberg, 2008) Migrants are considered as “the emblem” of precariat (Jørgensen M. , 2016, p. 960), trapped between the vulnerabilities in their personal lives, the impact of economic uncertainty on family, social life, community (Kalleberg, 2008) and the interplay of labor laws and immigration policies, rendering

them “unfree” to varying degrees by preventing them to, capitalize on their full labour power. (Jørgensen & Floros, 2020)

In their 2020 study, Floros and Jørgensen explore the design of “institutional uncertainty” (Anderson, 2010, p. 300) which leads to the emergence of precarity for migrant workers who fall under significant control by employers through immigration policy mechanisms. These policies not only regulate labor inflow but also shape the labor market to produce a workforce susceptible to the demands of neoliberal market forces (Anderson, 2010) (Goldring & Landolt, 2011). Their research places this dynamic within the contexts of Denmark and Greece, highlighting how such policies are not isolated incidents but are embedded within a broader strategy of labor market control. (Jørgensen & Floros, 2020)

Echoing Bourdieu's (1998) critique, Floros and Jørgensen argue that the widespread precariousness among migrants is a direct consequence of political choices, reinforced by neoliberal agendas that view workers as commodities. This viewpoint is supported by the analysis of Paret & Gleeson (2016) and further discussed by Lorey (2011) who suggests that precarization serves as a governance tool, shaping labor in ways that benefit the market at the expense of the worker's security and autonomy.

Thus, Floros and Jørgensen's (2020) work sheds light on the institutionalization of migrant precarity as a deliberate outcome of neoliberal policies, emphasizing the intersection of migration control and flexible labor market policies as a key area for policy intervention. Their findings call for a reevaluation of these practices, suggesting a move towards policies that safeguard migrant workers' rights and dignity in the face of market-driven imperatives.

In his article titled "Precariat – What it Is and Isn't – Towards an Understanding of What it Does" (2016), Jørgensen delves into different interpretations of "the precariat" and consequently the migrant as it's “emblem”. Jørgensen examines the impact of the precariat, portraying it as “having a performative component and as (being) an everyday phenomenon” (2016, p. 960), rather than a rigidly defined new social class as previously suggested by Standing (2011) Contrary to being mere victims,

he argues that migrants, through organization, can form a social movement, a force capable of altering the very dynamics which engender their "unfree" existence (Raunig, 2007) (Robinson, 2011), which is also in line with Standing's later work (2014).

Jørgensen emphasizes the performative component of precarity, suggesting it is a mode for analyzing the economy and rethinking identities and group formations within the neoliberal capitalist economies. Overall, he advocates for a dynamic understanding of the precariat and precarity, focusing on their roles in generating new forms of resistance and political engagement in the face of neoliberal capitalist challenges. (Jørgensen M. , 2016)

And while the precariat can be seen positively as a possibility, that of an organizing group, an emerging social movement (Raunig, 2007) (Jørgensen M. , 2016), the precarity faced by Danish construction workers today is multifaceted as shown above and it echoes Standings' work (A Precariat Charter. From denizens to citizens, 2014). Even when seen as a neoliberal governance tool (2020, p. 3), precarity within the construction industry in Denmark precarity is still shaped at a micro level through lack of proper health and safety instructions, underreported accidents, incentives to not report accidents, employer dependent accommodation, low pay, all part of an array of vulnerabilities identified in the recent, most comprehensive work on migrant construction workers in Denmark: "Migrants' work environment in the Danish construction sector" (Overgård, et al., 2023)

These aspects demonstrate the complex relationship between regulations, collective agreements, employment conditions, and the operational practices of both Danish and foreign construction companies and temporary agencies in Denmark. These factors not only influence the professional lives of migrant construction workers but also extend significantly beyond their occupational roles and work hours. Given that labor unions in Denmark continue to hold substantial influence compared to their counterparts in other countries, it is crucial to examine their perspectives and actions in shaping policy and the construction labor market in Denmark. Labor unions are often viewed as protectors and unifiers, advocating for workers' rights, and bringing them together, effectively organizing what could be considered as segments of the precariat.

A prime example of such an organization is the 3F union, which stands out as one of the foremost protectors and advocates for the rights and safety of construction workers in Denmark. This role of 3F

has been highlighted in recent incidents where their interventions have made significant impacts, as reported in various news sources (Mathiesen, 2022) and detailed on their official website. (3F, n.d.)

2.4. Cultural and social integration barriers

The integration of migrant workers into Danish society is complex, challenged by both policies and regulations as well as implicit cultural attitudes. The "Needed but Undeserving" research article (Thomsen & Jørgensen, 2018) shows how Danish policies frame migrants as both necessary for the labor market and yet undeserving of full societal inclusion. This duality manifests in policies that aim to attract highly skilled and specialized labor migrants, while imposing strict barriers to social welfare and a negative portrayal of low skilled workers. The narrative around migrants oscillates between them being seen as economic contributors and potential burdens, with policy narratives often using cultural criteria to legitimize discriminatory, restrictive measures.

The discourse within Denmark has evolved to increasingly utilize cultural and ethnic distinctions as criteria for migrant desirability, with a clear preference for Western migrants deemed more likely to integrate and contribute economically. This division underlines a growing trend toward defining migrant worthiness not just by economic capability but by perceived cultural compatibility. Policy decisions and deeming part of the migrant diversity "problematic" (Thomsen & Jørgensen, 2018, p. 360) creates an environment where migrants are met with skepticism resulting in reinforced barriers to integration.

The arbitrary cultural criteria, policies, and public discourses categorize migrants into deserving and undeserving groups which perpetuates exclusion and precarity. This has a noted impact on migrant construction workers, represented largely by low-skilled (not educated in a specific skill as it happens in Denmark) Eastern European citizens. (Overgård, et al., 2023)

In the case of migrant construction workers in Denmark, the influence of culture on their experiences is multifaceted and according to the comprehensive study conducted by Overgaard et al. (2023), it impacts their work environment, safety, and social interactions within the sector. This segment of

literature review presents a summary of the integration challenges and cultural dynamics faced by these workers, based on the “Migrants’ work environment in the Danish construction sector” (Overgaard et al., 2023) report.

One of the core issues highlighted in the report, is the significant language barrier that impedes effective communication, safety instructions comprehension, and social integration on construction sites. The lack of Danish language proficiency among migrants not only marginalizes them but also poses serious safety risks due to misinterpretations of safety protocols and instructions (Overgaard et al., 2023).

Furthermore, cultural differences in work ethics and expectations create an environment where migrant workers often find themselves undertaking tasks that are perceived as less desirable, under more strenuous conditions, and with higher health and safety risks. The report indicates that migrants frequently work longer hours under more hazardous conditions compared to their Danish counterparts, a disparity that underscores the need for a more inclusive and equitable work culture within the industry (Overgaard et al., 2023).

In the Danish construction sector’s safety culture, despite efforts to standardize safety training and practices, migrants often experience a diluted version of safety culture, primarily due to exclusion from comprehensive safety training programs and limited access to safety-related information in languages other than Danish. This exclusion not only affects their immediate safety but also their long-term health and well-being, as they are less likely to report accidents or unsafe conditions due to fears of reprisal or job loss (Overgaard et al., 2023).

Social integration challenges extend beyond the workplace, as migrant workers often face discrimination and social isolation, factors that further compound their vulnerability within the sector. The report reveals that migrants are subject to different expectations and treatment compared to Danish workers, leading to a sense of alienation and a lack of belonging. Such experiences not only affect their mental health and job satisfaction but also hinder the development of a cohesive and inclusive work environment (Overgaard et al., 2023).

In the national context of cultural-based discrimination, the cultural and integration barriers faced by migrant construction workers in Denmark have serious effects on the sector's work practices, safety

culture, and social dynamics. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including policymakers, employers, and trade unions, to foster an inclusive, equitable, and safe working environment. Strategies should focus on improving language access, enhancing cultural competency training, and promoting equal treatment and opportunities for all workers, regardless of their cultural background.

2.5. The 3F Trade Union and Collective Bargaining

Within the literature on labor unions' role in mitigating precarity among migrant workers, the 3F trade union in Denmark stands out. The union, self-described as "*Denmark's largest and most powerful trade union and unemployment fund*" "which actively works to secure better wage and working conditions for its members through extensive collective bargaining (3F, n.d., p. Working in Denmark) The union's influence is particularly significant in the construction sector, where Denmark's lack of a statutory minimum wage makes collective bargaining agreements crucial. According to the 3F website, "*the only way to regulate wages and other benefits such as pension, holiday pay, overtime, and paid sick leave is by having the employers [the construction companies, in this case] sign the collective agreements which stipulate the minimum wage and benefits*" (3F, n.d., p. Wages and Collective Agreements).

The choice to derive information for this section from the English version of the 3F website was informed by several considerations. As a non-Danish speaker, accessing and understanding the Danish version and other local sources poses a substantial challenge due to language barriers. Furthermore, the English site provides a straightforward representation of the union, free from the complexity of technical terms and formal language found in original documents such as collective agreements. It also circumvents the portrayal, positive or negative, of the union in various media outlets, presenting a clear and concise and neutral picture of its role and activities. The English version of the union's website is accessible and relevant, particularly to non-Danish speaking readers, including migrant workers who are a significant audience for this section of the website. This section does not encompass the broader

public image of the union or the complex external factors (such as media or possible cultural biases) that shape migrant workers' perceptions of the 3F trade union's role. Instead, it concentrates on creating an understanding of what the union does to provide the reader with a background to the data on which this paper is based on. This data is provided by the lived experiences of 3F professionals within the Danish construction sector, their work with migrant labor force, with foreign companies, collective agreements and other topics which will be discussed at length in the analysis section of this paper.

The comprehensive nature of collective agreements is evident in the details provided on the union's website, which state that the agreements *"stipulate wage and working conditions which are the results of negotiation between workers (whom 3F represents) and the employers"* (3F, n.d., p. Wages). Membership in 3F offers several advantages, including support with unemployment benefits, payment slips, and access to free wage and benefits checks, as well as advice on health and safety at the workplace.

The union's proactive efforts extend to the European level, where it addresses the vulnerabilities arising from the *"free movement of labor."* The 3F website outlines its commitment to ensuring that *"our rights as workers and as trade unions have the same status as those of businesses"* and emphasizes their view that *"market profits do not get precedence over human rights and welfare"* (3F, n.d., p. 3F and EU). This perspective is especially relevant in discussions about the effects of globalization on labor rights within the European single market and it underscores the union's stance on the matter.

For those seeking a deeper understanding of the union's contractual negotiations, the 3F website offers downloads of detailed documents such as the 2017 agreements, which encompass approximately 200 pages detailing contracts, pay conditions, systems, pensions, sick leave, public holiday provisions, and other employment-related stipulations. However, the latest Danish Industry Construction Agreement, dated April 2023, is available only in Danish, which limits accessibility for non-Danish speakers (DanskIndustri, 2024). This highlights an ongoing challenge in ensuring that migrant workers, who may not speak Danish, are fully informed about their rights and responsibilities in the workplace.

This literature review reflects the dual focus of 3F's activities: negotiating comprehensive collective agreements that serve to safeguard the rights and benefits of workers, and providing practical support to ensure these rights are understood and accessible to all members, including migrant workers. The

union's efforts to communicate these benefits, particularly in languages other than Danish, is crucial in its role as a mediator between Danish employment practices and the migrant workforce.

2.6. The 3F Trade Union as an Organization Constituted through Communication

This section presents and substantiates with theoretical perspectives the foundational approach of this paper concerning the individual 3F professionals interviewed for this report. Their interactions with migrant workers, compliance with rules and regulations, and dealings with various stakeholders are portrayed as reflective of the experiences of the 3F organization as a whole.

The Communication as Constitutive of Organization (CCO) theory posits that communication serves as the foundational mechanism through which organizations come into being and are sustained ongoingly through the continuous change which occurs in communication events. Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, and Clark (2011) describe communication as the “means by which organizations are established, composed, designed, and sustained” (p. 1150). The breadth of CCO scholarship views communication events as encompassing interactions, not only among individuals but also involving objects, ideals, values, and principles. Communication is then co-constructed and these elements collectively participate in what is described as the “inherently relational and performative character of communication” (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018, p. 2).

According to CCO scholars, organizations materialize through a dynamic process of meaning-making, where varied forms of communication coalesce to 'talk' organizations into existence, thereby constituting organizations primarily through communicative acts (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018, p. 2). This perspective is crucial for looking at the ways in which organizations as entities and not merely structures with rules and roles, evolve through everyday communications. In other words, this theory studies the collective process of organizing (actively, as a verb) as well as the structure with rules, positions etc. known as organization (the noun).

The Montreal School's approach to the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) emphasizes the constitutive impact of communication in organizations, establishing two key premises.

First, communication is viewed as a dynamic process that helps individuals understand and interpret their surroundings, fostering a shared framework that aids in interpreting organizational contexts and nurturing a sense of community, of belonging. Second, through conversations and ongoing dialogue, this communicative approach allows members within the organization to collectively represent and enact the organization, effectively transforming a collection of individuals into a unified entity, the collective actor. (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018)

This paper utilizes the CCO framework to create the basis for exploring the precarious conditions faced by migrant construction workers in Denmark as perceived through the activities of the 3F labor union. The aim of this paper is to describe how the precarity faced by migrant construction workers in Denmark is experienced by the 3F labor union, an institution operating within a society affected by the neo-liberal labor market practices. The CCO theory demonstrates how interviews, as communication events, with individuals, in this case, 3F construction industry professionals from across Denmark can provide an understanding of the experience of the organization itself.

Furthermore, CCO theory elucidates the dual role of organizational members who both interpret and are shaped by the organization's rules, policies, and values. To the CCO scholars, this interaction is akin to ventriloquism, where organizational agents not only articulate but are also directed by the organizational discourse, embodying and perpetuating the organization's values and norms in their daily activities. . This highlights the various forms of agency and see agency as an interplay between human and non-human contributors. *“organizational agents constantly invoke (or ventriloquize) policies, organizations, rules, norms, ideologies, values, and so forth in their daily activities. These same figures can also be seen as driving or making the organizational agents speak and act in a particular way.”* (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018, p. 4)

Thus, the narratives gathered from 3F professionals are not mere individual testimonies but are integral to understanding how the organization collectively perceives and acts upon the precarities affecting its members. These narratives facilitate a deeper understanding of 3F's organizational strategies and their impact, illustrating how communication not only reflects but also actively constructs the reality of the organization. In essence, the act of discussing their experiences allows these professionals to co-create the organizational reality, continuously reconstituting the organization through their communicative practices.

3. The Theory of Precarity

In the seminal work "A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens," Guy Standing delineates the concept of precarity as a condition marked by pervasive uncertainty, instability, and vulnerability, extending beyond the realm of employment to affect broader socio-economic dimensions of a person's life (Standing, 2014, p. 1). Precarity, according to Standing, signifies a fundamental transformation in the relationship between labor, capital, and the state, giving rise to a new class -the precariat. This emerging class is characterized by various distinguishing traits that collectively contribute to the lived experience of precarity and underscore the socio-political ramifications of this class's global expansion.

At the core of precarity lies the transition from stable, long-term employment to fleeting, flexible, and often unpredictable labor arrangements. Standing meticulously charts the transformation in labor relations where traditional employment contracts give way to transient engagements, frequently devoid of explicit terms regarding job security, work hours, or social protections (Standing, 2014, p. 55). This uncertain employment landscape is emblematic of the precariat's daily reality.

Compounding the precariat's plight is the erosion of occupational identity, which historically served as a cornerstone for personal and social development. Contrary to traditional workers, who could anchor their identity to a lifelong career, the precariat navigates through a fragmented occupational trajectory, fostering an existential precarity characterized by a profound sense of aimlessness and disconnection (Standing, 2014, pp. 127-128).

Another facet of the precariat's condition is the diminishing of rights. The precariat, as depicted by Standing, goes beyond the traditional confines of a labor class to encompass denizens.

As conceptualized by Guy Standing, denizens, refer to individuals residing within a given state who possess a more limited range of rights compared to full citizens. This concept is deeply rooted in the socio-economic conditions of modern labor markets and the state's regulatory frameworks. Denizens typically include migrants, refugees, but also other individuals, often citizens, who, due to their legal in the case of migrants and refugees or social status in the case of citizens, are excluded from the full spectrum of rights and protections that are normally afforded to citizens, such as access to social security, quality healthcare, comprehensive education, and political participation.

The term originates from historical practices where a denizen was an outsider granted certain rights by the sovereign but not encompassed in the full rights of citizenship. In contemporary settings, denizenship arises not just through migration but also from an unbundling of rights, where individuals, even those born within a state, may find themselves with restricted access to social and economic entitlements, effectively making them denizens in their own country.

Standing uses the term to underscore the growing segmentation within global labor markets, where the shift towards more flexible, insecure forms of employment, coupled with neoliberal policy reforms, has expanded the numbers of those with precarious living and working conditions. Denizens face challenges in achieving economic security and social inclusion, which are aggravated by their limited rights, making it difficult for them to advocate for better working conditions, social benefits, and protections that are essential for a dignified life.

This legal and social marginalization denies their access to essential services such as social security, decent living conditions, quality education, and healthcare, exacerbating their precarious existence (Standing, 2014, p. 1).

Social and economic vulnerability further accentuates the precariat's precarious condition. The absence of protective regulations and social benefits propels them into a cycle of debt, poverty, and social exclusion. Standing elucidates that this economic precarity is institutionalized through policies favoring flexibility over security, leaving the precariat to navigate the tumultuous waters of economic volatility (Standing, 2014, p. 213).

Institutionalized precarity, a systemic and structural manifestation of precarity embedded within state policies and corporate practices, is critically examined by Standing. The global tilt towards neoliberalism, marked by an emphasis on market efficiency and competitiveness, often undermines worker security and rights. The deregulation, privatization, and weakening of labor unions, emblematic of this era, have cemented a labor market characterized by its flexibility and disposability (Standing, 2014, pp. 33-34)(Standing, 2014).

The state's role evolution from a guardian of social security and labor rights to an advocate of market-driven policies has significantly contributed to the institutionalization of precarity. Austerity measures

and reductions in social spending by the state have further entrenched precarity, leaving the precariat devoid of a safety net (Standing, 2014, pp. 338-339).

Technological advancements and the globalization of labor markets have facilitated the spread of precarity by enabling employers to optimize cost efficiency, often at the expense of stable employment (Standing, 2014, p. 55). This thesis will leverage Standing's comprehensive theory of precarity to scrutinize the experiences of the Danish trade union 3F's employees, the professionals who work to protect the rights of construction workers in Denmark, and their engagement with the precarity experienced in this sector. It aims to unearth new avenues towards security and inclusion within the Danish labor rights framework by exploring the experiences and perceptions of 3F professionals on the institutional policies, labor market dynamics, and social practices that perpetuate the precariat's condition.

3.1. The Composition of the Precariat

The concept of the precariat, as explored by Guy Standing in his seminal work, "A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens," identifies a new social class emerging under the pressures of contemporary economic and policy changes. Standing categorizes the precariat into the following three distinct groups, each characterized by unique paths into precarious living and employment conditions.

The first group within the precariat includes individuals from traditional working-class backgrounds who have experienced a downward trajectory due to the dismantling of industrial-era job security and labor rights. These individuals have been directly impacted by the shift towards flexible labor markets, which has eroded the stable employment landscape once guaranteed to previous generations (Standing, 2014). The loss of stable, well-paid jobs has not only led to economic instability but also a cultural and psychological dislocation, as the identities and expectations shaped by the old working-class environment are no longer attainable. This shift underlines a critical aspect of precarity—its root in economic restructuring and its profound impact on traditional working communities.

The second significant component of the precariat comprises migrants and ethnic minorities, often characterized by an inherent vulnerability in labor markets. This group's precariousness is exacerbated by legal and systemic barriers that limit their access to stable employment and equitable labor rights (Standing, 2014). Furthermore, migrants and minorities frequently encounter social exclusion and discrimination, compounding their economic challenges and limiting their ability to secure upward mobility. Standing's analysis emphasizes the intersectional nature of precarity, where socio-economic instability intersects with racial, ethnic, and immigration status-related discrimination, highlighting the need for inclusive policies that address these overlapping vulnerabilities. He also underlines the ideological divide within the precariat, a misrepresentation of the three group that leads to a lack of common goals. Standings' work posits the need for critical solidarity among the groups of the precariat and points out how the first group is oftentimes pitted against the second through a rhetoric that portrays migrants as the culprit for the loss of the social and financial security that the people with a traditional working-class background are nostalgic about.

The third group identified by Standing is the educated youth, a newer and increasingly prominent segment of the precariat. Despite achieving higher levels of education, these individuals face a labor market characterized by a mismatch between their qualifications and the available job opportunities. This mismatch results in underemployment, meaning a reduced amount of work hours and where the skills and knowledge acquired through formal education are underutilized in precarious jobs that offer little security or career progression (Standing, 2014). This phenomenon raises concerns about the structural inefficiencies in the education-to-employment pipeline and the growing disillusionment among the youth, who find themselves burdened with education debt without commensurate returns on their investment.

Standing's classification of the precariat into these three diverse groups underscores the complex and heterogeneous nature of this class. Each group's distinct characteristics and the shared experience of precarity suggest a multifaceted problem that intersects economic, social, and policy dimensions. Understanding the varied pathways into the precariat is crucial for developing targeted interventions that address the specific needs and challenges of each subgroup. Moreover, Standing's work prompts a reevaluation of social protection systems, labor laws, and educational policies to better align with the realities of the contemporary labor market.

The present research paper explores the realities of the Danish construction industry, focusing particularly on the perspective of the 3F labor union in regards to their activity as an entity that protects workers' rights within the industry. As a pivotal institution in the labor market, 3F endeavors to support and advocate for migrant workers, ensuring that their rights and welfare are prioritized over economic gains in the construction industry. (3F, n.d.) This study aims to shed light on the details and practices of this institutional involvement, how it presents in the labor market dynamics, particularly in terms of safeguarding human rights and enhancing the working conditions of migrants.

3.2. Human Rights Implications of Precarity

In his exploration of the precarious labor conditions and their socio-economic impact, Guy Standing provides a thorough analysis of how precarity infringes upon fundamental human rights. His work, particularly centered on the emerging class known as the precariat, delves into the various dimensions in which precarious employment conditions challenge the enforcement and realization of these rights. This theory review section examines the specific human rights that are most frequently compromised under conditions of precarity, as outlined by Standing.

One of the core issues identified by Standing is the erosion of stable employment, which directly affects the *right to work and employment security*. Precarious workers often engage in temporary, part-time, or gig-based roles without secure contracts, significantly undermining their job security and stability. This form of employment lacks the protective measures typically afforded to more traditional roles, challenging the fundamental worker's right to stable and predictable employment.

Standing highlights that individuals in precarious jobs frequently lack comprehensive access to *social security* benefits. These benefits, which include health insurance, pension schemes, and unemployment insurance, are crucial for worker protection. The precarious nature of their employment, characterized by informal or zero-hours contracts, often disqualifies them from these essential supports, leaving them vulnerable to economic shocks.

The unpredictability of income inherent in precarious jobs can prevent individuals from achieving and maintaining an *adequate standard of living*. This instability can lead to difficulties in securing housing, accessing medical care, and meeting nutritional needs, which are all fundamental aspects of human welfare and rights.

Precarity also impacts labor rights, particularly in terms of *safe working conditions*. Workers in precarious settings may find themselves in unregulated or poorly regulated sectors where health and safety standards are compromised or altogether neglected. This neglect can lead to higher incidences of workplace injuries and illnesses, contravening the basic human right to a safe work environment.

The precariat disproportionately includes individuals from marginalized groups who are more vulnerable to discrimination. Standing points out that migrants, ethnic minorities, and individuals with lower educational backgrounds often populate the ranks of precarious workers. This demographic aspect emphasizes the intersectionality of precarity and discrimination, where precarious workers face heightened vulnerabilities due to systemic biases in the labor market, violating their right to non-discrimination.

Another significant challenge identified is the precariat's restricted ability to organize and engage in collective bargaining. The infringement on previously stated basic human rights is compounded by the fragmented and individualized nature of precarious work and it results in workers being isolated and without the collective power to negotiate better terms or conditions, undermining their labor rights and the effectiveness of labor unions. This breaches their *right to collective bargaining*.

Finally, the impact of precarity extends beyond the workplace into personal and *family life*. The instability associated with precarious employment can strain relationships and make stable family life and planning for the future extremely challenging, impacting the social fabric and community life.

The overview of human rights violations outlined above draws extensively from Guy Standing's analysis in his work "A Precariat Charter. From Denizens to Citizens" (2014) and highlights a range of concerns similar to those identified in the Overgård (2023) report. The "Migrants' work environment in the Danish construction sector" report (Overgård, et al., 2023) focuses specifically on the experiences

of migrant construction workers in Denmark and identifies several "problem areas" that resonate with the issues Standing addresses.

In this thesis, I will juxtapose the empirical findings and issues identified in the Overgård report with Standing's theoretical constructs on precarity. The analysis seeks to reveal the practical manifestations of Standing's concepts of precarity within Denmark's construction sector, as depicted in the Overgård report, all from the perspective of 3F professionals' and their work experiences.

4. Methodology

The methodology section of this thesis outlines the research design, methods, and philosophical underpinnings used to explore the experiences and perceptions of 3F professionals in the Danish construction sector. This section details the chosen approach to data collection and analysis, providing a clear framework for understanding how the study was conducted. The research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, recognizing the socially constructed nature of reality and emphasizing the importance of understanding the subjective experiences of the participants. The methodology combines qualitative narrative interviewing with thematic analysis to examine the multifaceted issues of precarity and institutional dynamics within the construction industry as seen by 3F professionals.

4.1. Philosophy of science

The Philosophy of Science underpinning this research serves as the foundation upon which the study's conceptual framework and methodologies are built. This research into the experiences of 3F union professionals within the Danish construction sector requires a nuanced understanding of the complex and dynamic social processes that shape these experiences. By examining the underlying philosophical assumptions about knowledge and reality, this section establishes the ontology, epistemology, and methodology that guide the investigation.

4.1.1. Ontology: Social Constructivism

This research adopts the ontology of social constructivism, which asserts that realities are continually constructed through social interactions and collective agreement, by social actors, rather than existing independently in the world. Social constructivism emphasizes the processes by which social phenomena are perceived, interpreted, and communicated within communities, making it an ideal

framework for studying the professional experiences of 3F union representatives in the Danish construction sector. Furthermore, social constructivism posits that the version of reality presented by a researcher in a work such as this, is in itself a social construction and the knowledge obtained through research is not fixed. Taking on hermeneutics as an epistemology allows for the knowledge derived through analysis to not be definitive, but an interpretation of socially constructed data, under a specific set of circumstances. (Clark, Foster, Sloan, & Bryman, 2021)

This perspective supports exploring how organizational practices, professional roles, and industry norms are co-constructed through interactions between union members and other stakeholders in the industry.

4.1.2. Epistemology: Hermeneutics

Epistemologically, this study is grounded in hermeneutics, which focuses on the interpretation of human experiences, particularly how individuals understand and make sense of their world (Gadamer, 1975). Hermeneutics, originally developed through the interpretation of texts, is applicable to social research as it provides a method for understanding complex human behaviors and organizational cultures. This approach is particularly valuable for interpreting narrative data, where the meanings embedded in the narratives of 3F professionals reveal their perceived challenges, achievements, and the cultural dynamics within the construction sector. The hermeneutic process involves a dialectic between the parts and the whole of the text, allowing for a deeper understanding that respects the context and the participants' perspectives. (Gadamer, 1975)

4.1.3. Methodology: Abductive Reasoning

Abductive reasoning is employed as the central methodological approach to analyze the narrative data collected from 3F union professionals. This approach facilitates the theory and data based iterative development of understanding and answering the research question related to the experiences of 3F professionals in their work life, as well as their perceptions regarding these experiences. (Blaikie & Priest, 2019)

Abductive reasoning is exceptionally suited to this study because it accommodates the description of everyday activities and meanings while allowing for the development of categories and concepts, leading to new insights that do not need to necessarily fit into pre-existing theoretical frameworks, enabling a free exploration of the nuanced experiences articulated in the narratives. (Blaikie & Priest, 2019)

Abductive reasoning assumes the existence of unarticulated, mutual knowledge which is negotiated by social actors in their encounters and it provides a good frame for teasing out the tacit understandings, meanings and intentions that influence social actors' actions. (Blaikie & Priest, 2019)

This research utilizes abductive reasoning to develop an initial understanding of emerging themes from narrative interviews, subsequently refining and systematically organizing these through thematic analysis. The formation of hypotheses based on the relevant body of research, and their continuous refinement against the data, allows for a dynamic interplay between theory and data. This methodological approach is particularly potent for uncovering new insights that may arise unexpectedly from the narratives provided by participants, which is a common occurrence in qualitative research involving complex social phenomena. (Blaikie & Priest, 2019)

Complementarily, thematic analysis is integrated to enhance the hermeneutic interpretation, providing a structured method to analyze textual data systematically. This ensures that interpretations are comprehensive and firmly grounded in the data itself, aligning well with the principles of abductive reasoning where insights emerge iteratively as themes are explored and refined. The application of thematic analysis thus supports the abductive reasoning process by enabling the detailed examination and organization of data, which helps in identifying and articulating the subtle patterns and themes that

are essential for developing a deeper understanding of the professional experiences of union representatives. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

This methodological synthesis not only fosters a rigorous analytical framework but also enriches the interpretative depth of the study, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are both substantively rich and theoretically informed. The alignment of abductive reasoning with thematic analysis exemplifies a robust approach to qualitative research, facilitating a nuanced and contextually grounded exploration of the roles, experiences, and perceptions of 3F union professionals within the Danish construction industry. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

4.1.4. Conclusion

The philosophical underpinnings of social constructivism and hermeneutics, complemented by an integrated approach of abductive reasoning and thematic analysis, provide a robust framework for this thesis. This approach enables a nuanced exploration of the roles, experiences, and perceptions of 3F union professionals within the Danish construction industry, ensuring that the study is grounded in their lived realities and capable of potentially contributing novel insights into industrial relations and labor studies.

4.2. Data Collection: Narrative Interviewing

The data collection method employed in this research is narrative interviewing, a qualitative technique that is particularly adept at capturing deep, contextual insights into individual experiences (Riessman, 2008). This method aligns seamlessly with the study's theoretical foundations in social constructivism and hermeneutics, providing a rich body of data through which the lived realities and meanings of 3F union professionals in the Danish construction sector are explored. The narrative approach not only sheds light on the personal and professional narratives, of the participants but also illuminates their tacit understanding of the broader social dynamics at play within the union and the industry.

Narrative interviewing focuses on eliciting detailed, personal stories from participants, allowing them to express their experiences in their own words (Chase, 2005). This technique emphasizes the importance of the participants' perspectives, making it an ideal tool for exploring how individuals construct meanings and identities through their narratives. By encouraging participants to narrate their experiences with minimal intervention, researchers can gain insights into the complex interplay of personal agency and social structure which allows an exploration on how 3F participates in constructing the reality experienced in their field. (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018)

The primary aim of narrative interviewing is to access the interpretive narratives of individuals, exploring how they make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Mishler, 1986). It is particularly valuable for revealing how personal and professional identities are shaped over time and how individuals navigate and influence their social and occupational landscapes. This method is well-suited for studies, such as this one, that seek to understand the subjective dimensions of professional life and tacit understanding within specific cultural and institutional contexts.

4.2.1. Implementation in This Study

In this research, the narrative interviews begin with a single open-ended question designed to encourage interviewees to start their story in their own way and focus on what they deem significant.

For this research the question addressed to the participants has been a spoken variation of the following:

“Could you please share your experience of working in the Danish construction industry, in the past, continuing to the present day and ending with your considerations regarding the future of this branch ?”

This approach helps in preserving the authenticity of their narratives, providing a natural flow to the data collection process. If participants require further prompting or come to a natural pause in their narration, follow-up questions are carefully crafted based on their responses to help elaborate on or clarify their earlier statements (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This responsive and flexible questioning technique ensures that the interviews remain focused on the participant's experiences while also allowing the researcher to delve deeper into specific themes of interest.

A limitation of the narrative method of interviewing that is specific to this study could have occurred when the participants were made aware that this master thesis is being conducted as part of the Culture, Communication and Globalization program at Aalborg University (AAU). The participants had been recently made aware of the seminal work “Migrants’ work environment in the Danish construction sector” (Overgård, et al., 2023), which is a comprehensive Aalborg University publication that delves into the multifaceted issue of migrant precarity in the Danish construction industry.

It can then be difficult to ascertain whether the participants chose to mostly discuss issues related to migrant workers within the Danish construction industry because these issues are most pressing to them and within the union, or simply because they believed discussing migrant workers would be most relevant to the present study.

4.2.2. Ethical Considerations

Narrative interviews involve discussions that can be personal and sensitive. Therefore, ethical practices are rigorously maintained throughout the research process. Participants are assured of confidentiality and informed about the purpose and use of the research. They are also reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Through narrative interviewing, this study captures the rich, detailed accounts of 3F union professionals, providing valuable insights into their professional roles and the broader institutional and social contexts that shape their experiences within the construction industry. At the time of conducting the interviews, the purpose of this paper was not specifically determined. Then, the participants were informed that this is an explorative study and their responses will be used to describe their experiences within the sector and hopefully to discover certain patterns that can help combat precarity within the Danish construction sector.

4.3. Data Analysis: Thematic analysis

This thesis utilizes thematic analysis to investigate the narratives obtained from interviews with 3F union professionals in the Danish construction sector. The thematic analysis method, detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006), allows for identifying, analyzing, and reporting on themes within the body of data. In this case, the method is employed to foster a deep exploration of the themes of precarity, addressed theoretically in the previous sections, through the lens of life-stories as experienced and articulated by the interviewees. The goal is to uncover how socio-economic factors, institutional policies, and social dynamics shape their experiences and perceptions of the system they are a part of, and how these perceptions in turn serve to shape this system (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018) and the Danish construction industry within 3F's stated purpose of preserving human rights and welfare. (3F, n.d.)

4.3.1. Thematic Analysis Framework

This paper follows the structured process of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). As such the section below describes the steps briefly and how each step pertains to the data corpus of this paper ensuring that each step is rigorously applied to maintain the integrity and depth of the analysis:

For this paper two narrative interviews were conducted, where 3F union professionals discussed their work experience within the Danish construction industry, they told stories, stated facts that they consider as truth and reflected on situations they encountered throughout the years. Thematic analysis allows for a structured interpretation of these experiences as co-constructed within society and this structure is what ensures the reliability of this study. (Braun & Clarke, 2006) Seeing as one of the main advantages as well as one of the strongest points of critique of thematic analysis is the flexibility it

awards in terms of data interpretation, this paper follows the guidelines described by Braun and Clarke (2006), the most cited authors on thematic analysis.

For this body of work, the first step - familiarization with data-, began with data collection while conducting narrative interviews, in which the participants shared their experiences and I, the researcher took an active listening role. The two interviews were 58 minutes, and 1 hour and 24 minutes long and together they represent a sufficient body of data, to inform a theory-led thematic analysis. The data set (used to conduct the analysis) was identified by an analytic interest driven by a specific research question. It is then to be concluded that the follow-up questions addressed during the interviews reflected the same theoretical knowledge, even though they were meant to simply elicit further elaboration on a specific topic, which is in accord with a constructivist view on reality and with narrative interviewing techniques.

Familiarization with the data was followed by immersive engagement with the interview recordings, then transcripts. The themes used for this analysis are theory driven and they look for specific data related to the theory of precarity. However, when reading and re-reading the data, noting initial ideas and impressions, possible new themes are to be considered.

In the second phase -generating initial codes-, I systematically code the data, labeling important features of the data that are relevant to the research question. As this project's framework involves a theory- driven approach to coding, the main body of coding revolves around the three emergent themes discussed in the section below. These themes are based on the overarching precarity theory (Standing, 2014) and its overlap with findings of the comprehensive report of migrant experiences in the Danish construction industry (Overgård, et al., 2023) .

When coding the entire data set, the emergence of codes which do not necessarily fit in the pre-determined themes is unavoidable. However, seeing as the purpose of this analysis is not a descriptive one, but rather an interpretive one, only the most informative codes and themes remain. The coding is done using the NVivo software and a category of Other is added to the initial codes, which could determine the emergence of new themes.

Searching for themes, is the third step of Braun and Clarke's method, and it involves collating all the data relevant to each potential theme and ensuring that these groupings make sense in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, as well as the research question.

Precarity is a complex issue that presents in many ways, underlines specific social dynamics and affects various aspects of life and this research paper is interested in nuanced interpretation rather than detailed description. Thus, the overarching themes had to be relevant within the existing body of knowledge, but also prevalent enough in the body of data, to provide a rich data set which can be interpreted to create new knowledge.

While new themes were considered, apart from the ones decided on a-priori, none of them became relevant or prevalent enough to be analyzed. An example of such a theme, which was temporarily named "Mafia", and the word was said by both participants as they related stories and reflected on events, however, most of the data under this theme was inconclusive and the remainder could be coded under "Institutional Precarity", seeing as it reflected institutional dynamics. This is all part of the next phase,- reviewing the themes- which requires to ensure that the themes form a coherent pattern and accurately represent the dataset. This involves merging, splitting, or discarding themes to better capture the essence of the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Defining and naming themes is the fifth step. Each theme is defined and refined to clearly articulate its essence. This stage ensures that the themes are distinct and meaningful in relation to the research questions and the broader theoretical framework seeing as this thematic analysis is theoretically driven.

The final step is reporting, which integrates the analysis with the existing literature, reporting on themes that link the data to broader discussions on precarity, labor rights, and the specific challenges faced by union professionals in the construction sector.

4.3.1.1. Developed Themes

The analysis focuses on three interlinked themes that reflect the existing body of knowledge on precarity within the Danish construction industry as well as the theory of precarity.

Economic Vulnerability: This theme will explore the view of the 3F union professional on how economic conditions, such as having to seek better paid employment abroad, fluctuating employment opportunities and wage instability, impact the lives of migrant construction workers. It will examine their views on the precarious nature of migrant employment and how this economic insecurity affects migrants' personal and professional lives.

Institutional Precarity: This theme will investigate the views of 3F professionals on institutional settings and labor policies that influence the degree of precarity experienced by workers. It will look at the role of unions, government institutions and regulations, and corporate practices in mitigating or exacerbating job insecurity, as seen by the participants.

Social Isolation: This theme will look at accounts related to the social and cultural barriers that contribute to the precarity of migrant workers. It will explore issues such as, discrimination, language barriers, cultural exclusion, and the lack of social support networks that affect their ability to secure stable and safe employment, as they are present in the accounts of the interviewees.

Some of the most relevant codes and subcodes that served to organize the data for analysis, based on the three themes above are: Misconstrued cultural explanations, Power and Exploitation, Discrimination, Failure to inform, Mistrust in Institutions, Bad employer relations after union involvement, Financial motivation and so on.

By identifying and exploring these themes, the thesis will offer insights into areas where policy and union efforts can be directed to improve the working conditions and overall security of these migrant workers, and it starts by identifying biases and meanings that 3F professionals have, which might negatively influence the union's efforts (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018) in their stated purpose of protecting human rights and welfare. (3F, n.d., p. 3F and EU)

5. Analysis

Throughout the analysis, the overarching, theory-based themes: Economic Vulnerability, Institutional precarity and Social Isolation managed to stand and capture the image of migrant precarity in Denmark, seen through the eyes of the 3F labor union. Initially, the data analysis and coding was designed to also include an “Other” theme, meant to leave space for non-predefined themes to become relevant from analyzing and interpreting the body of data, however, coding the data resulted in codes that speak to one or more of the three theory- driven themes above, thus further underlining the interconnectedness of economic vulnerability, institutional precarity and social isolation in the lives of migrant construction workers in Denmark.

In this section, each of the themes is discussed as per the findings of the thematic analysis, which was conducted on the dataset obtained through narrative interviewing of 3F professionals.

5.1. Economic Vulnerability

As highlighted in the existing literature (Overgård, et al., 2023) , migrants choose to work in Denmark for financial reasons. This is also the understanding of the interviewed 3F professionals who see this financial motivation as a reason for migrants accepting pay that is unacceptably low by Danish standards. One of the respondents pointed out how workers were happy to be paid 8000 kr even though they should have been paid 23.000 kr., thinking:

“I’m used to earn 2000 DKK a month, so that would be nice for me” (Appendix 1, p.1)

This type of thinking, that the 3F is working to combat the effects of, is reflected in the other interview as well:

“With the low payment they got at that time (65-70), they could be in Denmark for 4 or 5 months and earn what they normally should use a year to do in Lithuania” (Appendix 2, p.1)

Migrant's financial motivation when coming to work in the Danish construction industry exposes them to a series of vulnerabilities and puts them in situations where they don't have any recourse left.

Reportedly, some of the migrants who come to 3F say: *"I can't be where I'm working, but I have to, otherwise I will be sent out of the country"* (Appendix 2, p.2). Literature shows that the "unfree" labor (Jørgensen & Floros, 2020) is a recurrent pattern among migrants, and it can be inferred that there are more migrant workers who do not seek help from 3F but have similar experiences, however, the union can only help migrants who are members.

The analysis shows that the migrants who as a majority *"have only one purpose- earning money"* (Appendix 2, p.8), are vulnerable to **exploitation**:

"a lot of people who just came into Denmark that are afraid of what will happen to them if they lose their job. And the employers, they know that this is the situation and some of them, many of them actually use it. "(Appendix 2, p.2)

Even when the Union successfully intervenes, and succeeds in securing higher salaries for migrant workers, their vulnerability to loss of work and loss of income and their reticence to quit their jobs keeps them stuck and at risk.

"Then the employer found a way to get some of the money back so instead of having low payment and free meals they now had high payment and very high payment for meal or for food. And he also forced them to pay to live in his buildings" (Appendix 2, p.1)

Both respondents report having encountered inhumane living conditions among migrant workers. In the agriculture industry, people having been forced to live in the animal barn, separated only by a paper-wall, and in the construction industry, people living in sheds, overcrowded, and at times having to share a bed with other workers.

Another very prevalent topic in the two interviews, has been that of threats and violence against migrants. Both interviewees mentioned various circumstances in which employers would use such tactics, and part of these actions and threats are related to the exploitation of migrant's economic vulnerability.

An example related to overpaying for poor accommodation: *“It could be criminals or they are told they will be fired, or that they are told they will have to pay 25.000 kr to actually get back (to their home country) ... or whatever, I think we heard it all.”* (Appendix 2, p.7).

Another respondent explains how employers hold such power over migrant workers that even when the trade union is helping, people feel that they are at risk: *“So every time we try to get them the rights, they’re scared”* (Appendix 1, p.13) and in the same context the respondent talks about the practice of withholding salary for multiple months and the threatening migrants they would be fired or forced to leave. *“All the money they have earned, they (the employer) have them on the side and the workers are told they will never get them if they leave.”* (Appendix 1, p.13).

When talking about the violence and threats, and in one case, the employer driving an injured migrant worker over the border to avoid responsibility for a work accident, the respondents seem unphased, and resigned.

“Normally they get thrown into a car and then run up to the border and home. If they can do that (if the state of the injuries allows). So, we have seen examples of Polish people being driven home in injured conditions and because they have some right there, social security, in their country, so they transport them home.” (Appendix 1, p.15)

This apparent emotional detachment, the resigned attitude exhibited when talking about threats and violence was not seen when the respondents were talking about payment checks and taking construction companies to court, or boycotting them, getting them to sign or respect the collective agreements. This suggests that the respondents likely see themselves as powerless in the face of such circumstances, or that they simply do not see these situations as being within their area of responsibility. However, more of the intricacies of the 3F practices, employer retaliation and involvement of other institutions will be further discussed in the next section, under the theme of institutionalized precarity.

As far as one respondent sees, the migrant's financially driven work conduct is also one of the reasons that makes migrants more prone to **accidents**. *"because after 8-9 hours of work you are not thinking as well, or your muscles are not working as well as when you started"* (Appendix 2, p.8)

The respondent also thinks that when they get into an accident, migrants are less likely to seek medical advice because *"they also probably don't know it's free"* (Appendix 2, p.9) and because they could be told to not go to the hospital and threatened with violence, with being sent home or having their salaries withheld, having to pay a fine and so on. (Appendix 2, p.7; Appendix 1, p. 12).

Pay discrimination is another well-documented (Overgård, et al., 2023) issue faced by migrants, but the interesting find of this analysis is the way pay discrimination is internalized and almost normalized by the respondents.

When discussing working conditions and the skills of workers, a respondent pointed out that the number of *"great workers"* with a *"better attitude than Danish guys"* who *"Want less payment for it"* is growing, even though there is still a great number of people being *"underpaid or cheated"*. (Appendix 2, p.2).

In this case, the respondent is talking about working conditions that would be *"fair for anyone, even a Danish guy"* and mistakenly equates fair working conditions with overall fair treatment, while specifically saying that the migrant workers ask for less money for the work they are doing (Appendix 2, p.2). Coming from a union-construction branch-professional, who has spent many years fighting for the rights of workers and *"to protect the construction branch, to not become too low paid"* (Appendix 2, p.5), preserving the construction branch and the Danish welfare system, this skewed view can be seen as an unintentional bias, or it can be inferred that the years of experience working with underpaid, exploited migrants has created a new sense of normalcy that the respondent is not aware of.

As Standing put it: *"...policies and institutional changes should be judged by whether they move towards realizing rights for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society."* (Standing, 2014). Seeing as the 3F union has an active role in changing the landscape of precarity in the construction industry in Denmark, it follows that the 3F professionals and their collaborations with each other and

other actors are affecting this sector. Experiencing discriminatory pay as normal, for any reason, sets the efforts of the union off the path that they should ideally be charting. It can be vital that such biases are discussed and explored within the union.

In sharing their views of why there is still a *“big group that actually are not being paid what they should be paid”* (Appendix 2, p.2), the respondent shares their realization that part of the problem are cultural differences in that migrants are ignorant to the Danish system *“We have unemployment benefits, but coming here from Romania, Poland or wherever, you don’t have the same system where you come from and you’re not raised in it. So you don’t know how well it actually works.”* (Appendix 2, p.2). In the broader context, the respondent was reflecting on why migrants are afraid to lose their jobs and are willing to be exposed and experience “unfree” lives.

Nevertheless, explaining unfair pay, and migrant’s vulnerability - in relation to changing jobs, if they are being exploited and losing their income- through an inherent lack on the part of the migrants can be seen as an “easy” and limiting justification. While it might make logical sense that if migrants knew, and had access to the Danish welfare system, they would be better at advocating for themselves, it can be inferred that believing this narrative might come in the way of a 3F professional and the union overall to find all the possible ways to advocate for migrants, it might come in the way of labor unions successfully doing their jobs.

Both respondents seem to share the same attitude towards migrants being willing to accept very low pay. This attitude can be interpreted as either a way to find easy, plausible explanations, or a way to assign blame, either way, resulting in a disempowering view of the situation followed by a relinquishing of responsibility. Blaming cultural differences, lack of knowledge about the Danish system (Appendix 2), or the seemingly inherent quality of migrants of being “cheap people” (Appendix 1), as exemplified by the other respondent, could even be seen as a way for an individual to distance themselves from the unfairness of the world. However, for a 3F professional who aims to attract more members to the 3F trade union and protect the construction industry in Denmark in doing so, such views can be limiting and detrimental to the success of the union’s mission.

Seeing the willingness of migrants to work for little money and in poor conditions as part of the problem, otherwise put, seeing the precariat as partly “at fault” for the overall persistence of precarity in the Danish construction industry, can be an understandable point of view. However, for 3F professionals to internalize this as a truth, it can be detrimental to their ability to tackle the issue of pay discrimination within this branch. It can be argued that such an attitude would rather perpetuate the discriminatory pay. One of the respondents refers to migrants as “cheap” a number of times, and even though the respondent starts by saying that people used to be brought here because they were cheap and not because they were skilled workers, but there had been some improvement on this matter, then towards the end of the interview the respondent reiterates that “*one of the reasons why people from less paid countries are coming to Denmark is because they are cheap. It’s not because of their qualifications. It’s the price, price, price*” (Appendix 2, p 17), this, in the context of discussing visions for the future, namely the respondents hopes that foreign companies would show a higher degree of interest in learning the Danish law and rules when operating in Denmark. The respondent explains that foreign companies are attracted to Denmark because of the “cheap people” (Appendix 1), rather than mentioning, for instance, the possible higher prices and higher revenue that a foreign construction company might earn from operating in Denmark, as compared to a country that is less wealthy. This further suggests that - “cheap” migrant workers- is an internalized truth around the construction industry and it is used as an easy explanation, in this case for a rather more complicated set of circumstances.

In conclusion, seeing the fact, that migrant workers are likely to accept lower salaries than the Danish standards, as anything other than a variable to work with when strategizing to combat precarity, to preserve human rights above profit, will hinder the work that the 3F trade union is meant to engage in. The Union at large could benefit from addressing such occupational biases.

As the issue of precarity represents an interconnectedness of many factors, many of the economic vulnerability areas discussed above are intertwined with the institutionalization of precarity addressed in the next sub-chapter.

5.2. Institutionalized precarity

When looking at the theme of institutionalized precarity within interviews with 3F professionals, it could be argued that the relationship between the migrant workers and the union is the most important factor to take into account, seeing as the union is meant to protect workers' rights within the industry.

Both respondents describe this relationship as a challenging one. They report that migrant workers have too little knowledge of the Danish system to understand why being part of a union is helpful (Appendix 2), the interviewees have also experienced that being a part of 3F can be seen as too expensive by migrant workers (Appendix 1, p.3). When faced with migrants' mistrust in the union, one of the respondents explained it as a cultural differences issue (Appendix 2, p. 5). However, many of the stories told by both respondents point to a justified mistrust of the union on the part of migrant workers.

As 3F employees have been working on having companies sign collective agreements, which are as one respondent puts it *"the foundation of our work"* (Appendix 1, p. 9) , migrant workers have often times been disposed of as a means to an end, rather than being protected.

"Whenever we met someone not speaking Danish, we met them running... there was cheating with the law, paying tax, having rights to be in Denmark. So often when we met some years ago, we found things that wasn't right and called the police, called the tax office, called Arbejds Tilsynet to have them to check this area. But they wouldn't come if we didn't actually catch one or talk to one (a migrant construction worker)" (Appendix 2, p. 2)

It appears that the presence of migrant workers has been equated with the existence of irregularities in the past, and the institutions¹ collaborated well when the union would *"catch"* a migrant worker, which provided all the evidence needed against a company. *"Later on this issue was more difficult because*

¹We had a very good connection to the institutes at that time because the police knew that when we called them and the tax company knew that when we call them, it was serious, we were not doing it for fun.

Later on this issue was more difficult because they were far more people who actually have a fair payment. So meeting people from foreign countries wasn't the same as finding a problem. (Appendix 2, p.2)

they were far more people who actually have a fair payment. So meeting people from foreign countries wasn't the same as finding a problem.” (Appendix 2, p.2) .

The same migrant workers who are being exploited and taken advantage of and who are ignorant to the Danish system- according to the two 3F professionals interviewed- have experienced, for many years, having the police, or tax office called by the Union and have had to answer for irregularities that they might have been coerced into as discussed in relation to economic vulnerability.

The two respondents explained that in Denmark there is no general collective agreement as there is in Norway (Appendix 2, p. 10) and seeing as the collective agreements are the main means regulating the labor market in the construction industry, the main goal of the union is to have all companies, whether local or foreign sign a collective agreement.

“If we find a new company who hadn't got any agreement. I would say sometimes in some few minutes or hours that we have sent a letter to them. We want to discuss an agreement with you. Normally, then they have a week to respond and they if it, they don't respond. Then we can send a new letter where we blockade. Immediately about a week later, so, so from the start when we meet them until they are blocked that could be a short period just 14 days.” (Appendix 1, p. 10)

A blockade, demonstrations and going to the press are some of the strategies that the union employs in securing an agreement with a company (Appendix 1 and 2). However, another strategy is proving that the company is breaking the law, one way or another.² And this involves the workers, their salaries³, living conditions, work safety, accommodation, as well as the validity of work permits and so on. Enforcing the collective agreements after they have been signed often involves the workers as well.

² They haven't broken the collective agreement because they are not obligated to it, but there's a lot of laws that they might have broken. And our goal is to stop them. So if we can stop them using a law about how high payment they can charge for accommodation then we use that, or a law about the working environment, the we do that, or a law about underpaying foreigners, we take that.

It's just a way to stop them doing what they are doing. And in these cases, it has actually nothing to do with foreigners because we do it. We will do the same if it was a Danish guy, but he would probably say no to work there. (Appendix 2, p.4)

³ The people who are working for 50 kr per hour are also part of the problem, so we want it to stop. So, we will normally contact the authorities who should be contacted. If they are here illegally, from a country where they cannot just cross the border. We will call the police. If they've been here for a long period but no address in Denmark, we'll call the TAX company. And we do that often. (Appendix 2, p.4)

To take the broader perspective, considering what the respondents have experienced, that migrant workers have little understanding of the Danish laws and regulations, that migrants are habitually under some sort of threat or financially vulnerable at the hand of their employers, and knowing that the 3F union often calls the other authorities when they arrive at the migrants' workplace, it is logical to infer that migrant's reported fear⁴ of the union is not an issue of cultural differences, but a justified fear based on the perception that the union only provides further complications to the migrant's already precarious lives. It can be deduced that a years-long tradition of having the police, or tax authorities called during a visit from the union would in and of itself portray 3F as untrustworthy. Furthermore, according to the respondents, the union fails to secure the collaboration of the same institutions when it comes to protecting the migrants, their rights and well-being.

In one of the interviews the respondent describes a case where the union managed to double the salary that the workers were earning per hour, only to have the employer increase food and accommodation payment.

"Then the employer found a way to get some of the money back so instead of having low payment and free meals they now had high payment and very high payment for food. And he also forced them to pay to live in his buildings. But actually they still had a small raise of income compared to before." (Appendix 2, p.2)

After this experience, at a meeting with all the workers involved, the migrant workers asked : *"'How can we be sure that you are actually a trade Union?' "* the interviewee reports being baffled by this, not knowing what to answer, but goes on to firmly dismiss this encounter on account of *"people coming from a very different culture than Danish culture from a very different background"* (Appendix 2, p.3)

Arguably, it can be hard to understand, how a law that regulates people's salaries does not also regulate the abuse of power exhibited by this employer.

⁴ They're afraid that you go there and you make trouble for the employer and the employer will make trouble for them. So every time we try to get them the rights, they're scared. It's not very often, there is some of them who dares to say "I'll be a witness. I will stand forward for this" No, they say : " no, no, no!"(Appendix 1, p. 13)

Again, taking on a broader perspective, it becomes available that people who do not understand the Danish laws, had an institution interfere at their workplace, which resulted in them being paid a slightly higher hourly rate, but being now forced to live on the premises provided by the employer and pay high amounts of money for food. It can also be inferred that the 3F intervention created tension at least among the workers and their employer if not among the workers themselves, isolating them, making them feel unsafe, possibly slighted, which deepens precarity.

Another respondent, discussed a case where hundreds of migrant workers from Romania, were brought to work in the Danish construction industry sector, having signed contracts for 8000 kr a month. However, according to the collective agreement the company had signed, they should have paid each worker 23.000 kr. instead. The union rectified the pay discrimination case, started checking on the migrants' salary and it appeared they were now being paid according to Danish standards. (Appendix 1, p. 11)

The interviewee -who was handling this case at the time- then found out that at the beginning of every month a man would go on the construction site and collect the 15.000 kr surplus from every worker in cash. The 3F professional contacted the police:

"I've come to the police and said 'every month on the 5th. About 3 o'clock in the evening. There'll be a man in a car in this color, with this number, driving from there to there and out to the office. When he set his foot on the step on the office, he would have 500.000 kr in his basket. And he can't tell where he's got the money from. And police said: 'We haven't done the time.'" (Appendix 1, p. 12)

The police justified not being able to help by saying they had to investigate two recent murders. While human exploitation and fraud are not as grave as murder, this situation suggests that as an institution the police does not prioritize combatting the illegal practices and the exploitation of migrant workers, which appears to be so grave and so frequent ⁵ that one would expect a whole police department dedicated to it. The lack of such a department could further indicate a governmental lack of interest in combatting precarity and the issues that stem from it.

⁵ I don't think we can give you, an honest picture of how much is bad guys and how much good guys. If you see in the database I made since 2012 that's around 3000 cards in that. And out of that, there is 95-99 percent, who does it wrong, do something wrong. And I heard the report from the SKAT and the "arbejdstilsynet" some days ago and they say around 50-60% of them. Who they contacted do it wrong. So it's the majority who do it wrong. (Appendix 1, p 16)

5.3. Social isolation

The social isolation experienced by migrant workers in the construction industry in Denmark is often a result of **discriminatory** practices, both at the place of employment as well as outside of the working hours, various such situations, and their effect on the wellbeing of the migrant workers, are described in the Overgård et al. report. (2023)

One of these situations is the vulnerability to which migrants are exposed at the working sites in regard to **work safety**, the lack of proper safety training, due to language barriers and treating work-site safety as a formality (Overgård, et al., 2023), not only endangers the health of migrant workers, but it also isolates them from their Danish coworkers, who work based on different standards. This separation between migrants and Danes hinders the migrant's possibility to learn about the Danish work culture, laws, fair practices, fair pay and so on. (Overgård, et al., 2023). It can be argued that this separation is purposeful and it serves the employer to not invest in translators and conduct the safety training required by law.

One of the respondents discusses the existence of such situations and the way language skills prevent the implementation of the work environment law at the place of work.

“The environment law say that the employer actually is obligated to educate any employed person in how to work safely. Yeah, and that can be difficult if you hire a person from Romania and he or she can only speak the Romanian language and the employer when he can speak Danish. But we find it all the time.” (Appendix 2, p.8)

Instead of indicating that the union calls the relevant authorities in these cases as well, to help rectify the unsafe working environment, the respondent goes on to calmly explain this situation through the lack of knowledge of migrants and their **cultural differences**. And while this does not necessarily imply that the responsible authorities are not involved, the attitude of the 3F professional points to the same kind of biased view and reflects the same kind of resigned attitude and possible feeling of helplessness and acceptance as discussed before.

“...But we find it all the time. But these foreigners do not really know how the work is controlled in Denmark, so when an employer said this is how it is they tend to think he must know because he's a local one and I am the foreigner .In Denmark you don't you don't jump just because your boss ask you to jump. You say why? But coming from other countries, you often people say: how high? yeah, because they are the authority. When I talk to foreigners coming here, I say lesson number one is to learn to say: WHY? And when you learn that you learn it all. (Haha) It doesn't work all the time...” (Appendix 2, p.8)

The shoulder shrug attitude is encountered throughout both interviews when discussing almost all topics except the collective agreements and fighting for the fair payment of construction workers, and this is a matter of concern, because even though economic vulnerability is of great impact on the lives of the migrant workers, their precarious situations are marked by multiple complex and intertwined issues. If the 3F union fails to address all these issues with equal verve, it is likely that they will also fail to attract migrants to become members of the union, fail to protect migrants and in the end the construction industry. One of the respondents equates the work the union is doing with protecting the construction branch as well as the Danish welfare system.⁶

When the union interferes in order to follow their agenda of signing or enforcing a collective agreement, they end up involving migrant workers one way or another. This results in creating a tense atmosphere between the migrants and their employers. They can be fired if they choose to become members of the union or to speak up, and the union cannot protect them:

“'sorry, no more work!' And then the next day they employ another. And you could, you can do the the case that if one got fired, and you hire another person in the same position, you could do the case, but it's very, very difficult to prove that this is the reason. So you had to prove it.” (Appendix 1, p. 4)

⁶ But you are growing in a realization saying that if we don't defend our system, then we will end up with a 90% of the population loosing on this because the welfare system in Denmark is based on high TAX for high-income, yeah, but also high-tax for low-income. So when you are, as we (3F) are always working for people to get better paid, then we also work for the welfare system to have more money to use, so it's my opinion that our welfare system is actually built on the back of the Trade Unions, so if we lose our power, we'll lose our Danish welfare system. (Appendix 2, p.6)

Or they are in an arguably worse position where they get beaten, threatened: “*‘Why should we talk to 3F because they only make problems? I might get fired. Beat or threatened.’*” And these threats can extend beyond Denmark and beyond the migrant’s person, where the employer would say: “*we know where your family is living, you cannot say nothing*” (Appendix 1, p.13)

Living with such stressors, coupled with a tiring and dangerous job, insecurities about income, healthcare as discussed above, accommodation which provides little privacy or comfort⁷ can all lead to social isolation and further to mental health problems as it was also shown in the Overgård et al. report (2023).

In conclusion, the analysis illustrates the multifaceted challenges and vulnerabilities that migrants face in the Danish construction industry and how they are perceived and experienced by 3F professionals. Driven by financial needs, migrants accept conditions and compensation far below Danish standards, often at the risk of their own well-being and safety. This exploitation is exacerbated by pay discrimination and inhumane living conditions, compounded by threats and even physical violence. Despite the efforts of trade unions like 3F, the deep-seated issues of precarity persist, often going unaddressed due to a combination of cultural misconceptions, biases, institutional failures, and systemic exploitation.

The analysis sheds light on the critical need for more robust and holistic mechanisms to protect migrant workers and enforce labor laws effectively. It calls for a reassessment of union strategies and governmental policies to ensure that they not only address the economic incentives of migrant workers but also bolster their rights and safety. Ultimately, tackling these issues requires an effort to shift cultural perceptions and legal frameworks to create a fair and equitable working environment for all, particularly the most vulnerable, informing the approaches taken to protect the precariat by the experience of the precariat. This effort is crucial not only for the protection of migrant workers but also for the integrity and sustainability of the construction industry and broader societal welfare in Denmark as it is also pointed out by one of the respondents.

⁷... before you saw a lot of examples of 3, 4, 5 guys in the same room. Even we have heard about places where they slept in the same bed just in different working hours. (Appendix 1, p.15)

6. Discussion

During the participants recruitment process for my Master's thesis research at AAU, the topic of "the big report from AAU" by Overgård et al. (2023) inadvertently emerged. This topic was raised by both the 3F employees interviewed and their colleagues. Consequently, it is challenging to ascertain why both respondents focused predominantly on migrant workers during their interviews, using Danish workers only as a point of comparison. The narrative interview question pertained to their experiences as 3F professionals in the Danish construction industry. Both respondents chose to focus exclusively on migrant workers, possibly influenced by the mention of the work of Overgaard et al. (2023) However, this does not negate the fact that the precarity of migrant workers remains a significant issue in the Danish construction industry and a major concern for the union.

As discussed in the analysis, another overarching similarity from the two interviews is that both respondents talked almost exclusively about pay, the strategies that go into signing collective agreements and the payment aspects of existing collective agreements. The participants only mentioned accommodation, health and safety, when specifically asked about it. And their overall attitude regarding injustices related to other than pay and collective agreements was one of resignation and acceptance. I interpret this to come mostly from a perceived lack of power, or agency over these injustices.

One of the respondents describes collective agreements as the “foundation” (Appendix 1, p. 9) of the work that the 3F union does for their members.

However, the present analysis has shown how oftentimes the work done around the signing or enforcing of collective agreements makes migrants be weary and afraid of the union itself, either because they simply don't trust the union, or because when getting involved with the union, migrants expect reprisals from their employers.

The respondents did not mention any strategies within the union to breach this lack of trust between the union and their potential migrant members, even though as one of the respondents put it, the proportion of Danes working in the construction industry who are 3F members is 3 times higher than that of

migrants: “we have an organization of Danish people, about 75-80% who's members of the right union but among foreigners, we might have 25-30% so the amount is small”. (Appendix 2, p. 10)

When discussing possible solutions for the future, the same respondent mentions his affinity to the possibility of adopting the Norwegian model, with universal, standard collective agreements that all companies need to adhere to. However, the respondent thinks that across 3F this is perceived as a strategy that would engender loss of power for the union.⁸

It can also be argued that considering the growing migrant workforce in the sector and the fact that they chose to be part of the union in small numbers, 3F is already losing power and influence within the construction branch, which is also confirmed by another respondent, although this respondent does not specifically mention their reasoning for the loss of power:

“But we are not as strong if you ask me. Every day we are getting weaker.” (Appendix 1, p 11)

At the same time, another very important dynamic is at play. When signing collective agreements, and when winning lawsuits against companies that break these agreements “Every year, 3F secures about one billion kroner for our members as compensation and default on the payment of pension, wages and holiday pay.” (3F, n.d.) for all sectors.

However, the compensation to be received is calculated for all the affected workers from within a company that has defaulted on payment, but only paid out to the workers that are also 3F members, as confirmed by one of the respondents.⁹ The remaining money is goes the 3F.

⁸ We could also go the Norwegian way, where by law you have defined that if a company doesn't have a collective agreement it is automatically forced to follow the agreement that is most used in their line of work. SO by law, in Norway every company has to follow the standard agreement for that branch, unless they have say they make a new one with like 3F or another... I actually like the idea. It's some kind of fiction but I know that in 3F, as a big company, we don't like it, because we like the system we have now where we actually have to cooperate with the companies and sign in the trade union. So I think they see it as a loss of power for 3F. (Appendix 2, p. 10)

⁹ No. They are not a member. There's wall between those who are not members and those who are members. And if a Polish man come to work in Denmark and is a member, we have a case and we get some money from the company. He is going to have the money yeah. But if it's another guy who says : “I don't want to be a member” Then we collect the money and we put it in the box to pay B's and my work.(Appendix 1, p. 3)

According to the respondents, companies cheat foreigners because the migrant workers are unaware of the Danish rules and as discussed above most migrants are not 3F members, which means that the income 3F makes on account of cheated migrant workers who are not 3F members must have increased exponentially.

Although, 3F is still making considerable efforts to combat precarity, it can be argued that since the union sees some form of financial gains from the persistence of precarity, they do not have as high an incentive to restructure their strategies, to invest in combating biases and to recognize that the interconnectedness of economic vulnerability, institutionalized precarity and social isolation, requires holistic solutions, in order for the union to keep its influence in a globalized, ultra-competitive world.

The present paper adds to the existing body of knowledge on precarity in the construction sector in Denmark from a new perspective, that of the experience of 3F professionals, and it has identified biases, and weak points in the approach of the union. These findings could help 3F professionals understand their “blind spots” and potentially improve their strategies and outlook when conducting their business within the industry. This research paper is based on only two interviews and this perspective provides an abundance of information that would help tackle precarity. It is to be expected that conducting more interviews in future research, might offer an even deeper understanding of current practices and their limitations.

Further research on the topic is highly necessary to establish if and how the union is to not only address pay disparities but also combat threats, unsafe conditions, and discrimination. Such research could help create a comprehensive approach and strategies to help the industry move towards a more just and equitable environment for all workers.

7. Conclusion

This thesis explored the experiences of 3F trade union professionals who work within the Danish construction industry, as well as their perceptions and the making meaning involved in their work-life experiences. The data for analysis was constituted of two lengthy narrative interviews, in which the 3F employees were asked to discuss their professional life experiences within the Danish construction industry.

In examining the perspectives of 3F professionals on the conditions faced by migrant construction workers in Denmark, this thesis has highlighted the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the construction branch dynamics. The findings reveal the ways in which 3F professionals perceive, interpret, and respond to the challenges and precarity faced by migrant workers, shedding light on the inherent biases, attitudes, and institutional practices within the union.

The narrative interviews with 3F professionals have demonstrated a range of perceptions and biases that shape their understanding of the experiences of migrant construction workers. The professionals often exhibit an awareness of the economic vulnerabilities faced by these workers, such as low pay, inhumane living conditions, and financial exploitation. However, the way they discuss these issues sometimes reflects a resigned attitude or a lack of agency, particularly when addressing threats and violence against migrants.

Additionally, the interviews reveal a tendency among some 3F professionals to rationalize pay discrimination or to view migrants' willingness to accept low wages as an inherent characteristic, rather than as a consequence of systemic exploitation. These attitudes indicate potential "blind spots" within the union's approach to addressing precarity and ensuring fair treatment for all workers.

The thesis also highlights the institutional challenges faced by 3F in protecting migrant workers' rights and improving their working conditions. The union's focus on signing and enforcing collective agreements, while essential, sometimes overshadows other critical issues, such as workplace safety, threats, and social isolation. The professionals' narratives suggest that the union's strategies often

prioritize economic issues over broader concerns, reflecting a limited engagement with the complexities of precarity.

Moreover, the interviews suggest that the union's relationship with governmental authorities and other stakeholders is complex and sometimes contentious. The professionals report difficulties in securing support from institutions like the police or tax authorities when addressing issues of exploitation or abuse, indicating a lack of alignment between the union's goals and broader institutional priorities.

The findings of this thesis have important implications for 3F and its approach to addressing precarity among migrant construction workers. The identified biases and attitudes within the union highlight the need for greater awareness and sensitivity to the complex challenges faced by these workers. The union would benefit from adopting a more holistic and inclusive approach, addressing not only economic issues but also social and cultural factors that contribute to precarity.

Furthermore, the thesis suggests that 3F should re-evaluate its strategies and priorities to better align with the needs and experiences of migrant workers. This might involve strengthening relationships with governmental authorities, improving communication and outreach to migrant communities, and developing targeted initiatives to address issues such as threats, discrimination, and unsafe working conditions.

In conclusion, this thesis has provided valuable insights into the experiences, perspectives and biases of 3F professionals concerning the challenges faced by migrant construction workers in Denmark. The findings highlight the interconnectedness of economic vulnerability, institutional precarity, and social isolation in shaping these workers' experiences, and underscore the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to addressing precarity. Moving forward, 3F and other stakeholders must prioritize the well-being and rights of all workers, particularly the most vulnerable, to create a fair and equitable working environment in the Danish construction industry.

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