



Ontological Reconstruction of Marginalized Worker Welfare Beyond Utilitarian Measurement: Precarity Social Justice Perspective

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Abstract:

Conventional welfare measurement predominantly relies on utilitarian economic indicators, limiting its ability to capture the multidimensional realities experienced by marginalized workers. This study aims to reconstruct the ontological concept of worker welfare by integrating perspectives of labor precarity and social justice beyond conventional utilitarian measurement. A qualitative conceptual research design was employed through a thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed literature on welfare, ontology, precarity, capability, and social justice. The analysis identified three principal findings: welfare extends beyond material prosperity toward dignity and recognition, labor precarity generates interconnected economic, institutional, and psychological vulnerabilities, and social justice reconstructs welfare through redistribution, recognition, and representation. The study contributes a novel conceptual framework that integrates ontology, labor precarity, and social justice into a unified understanding of marginalized worker welfare. Future welfare assessment and labor policies should incorporate multidimensional human-centered indicators alongside conventional economic measures.

INTRODUCTION

The welfare of marginalized workers has become an increasingly significant concern because contemporary economic development continues to evaluate social progress predominantly through utilitarian indicators such as income growth, productivity, employment rates, and aggregate consumption (Del et al., 2024; Nichols, 2024). Although these measurements provide valuable macroeconomic information, they frequently overlook the lived realities of workers who experience unstable employment, insecure income, social exclusion, and institutional vulnerability (Antonio et al., 2021; Hernandez et al., 2025; Huerta et al., 2024). Consequently, welfare is often interpreted as a measurable economic outcome rather than a multidimensional human condition embedded within dignity, recognition, and justice. This imbalance has generated growing criticism among scholars who argue that prevailing welfare assessments inadequately represent the ontological experiences of marginalized workers in increasingly precarious labor markets.

The expansion of informal employment, platform-based labor, temporary contracts, and other forms of precarious work has intensified the gap between statistical welfare and everyday human experiences. Many workers formally classified as economically active continue to encounter uncertain earnings, limited social protection, restricted bargaining power, and exclusion from decision-making processes (Cottier et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022). These conditions reveal that employment alone cannot guarantee meaningful welfare because insecurity extends beyond financial deprivation into psychological, social, and institutional dimensions. Field observations across developing economies consistently demonstrate that marginalized workers remain vulnerable despite improvements in conventional economic indicators, suggesting that current welfare measurements inadequately capture structural inequalities and persistent forms of social injustice (Mukhlis et al., 2025; Obaideen et al., 2024).

Previous studies have substantially advanced welfare research from various disciplinary perspectives. Chaika (2025) and Cole (2023) emphasized capabilities and substantive freedoms as the foundation of human welfare beyond income. Chatterjee et al. (2022), Chatterjee et al. (2022), and Chatterjee et al. (2023) further developed capability theory by highlighting human dignity and essential functionings. Basara et al. (2023) and Palmtag (2024) introduced the concept of the precariat to explain structural labor insecurity, while Sun et al. (2023), Gough (2024), and Regenwetter et al. (2022) argued that justice requires redistribution, recognition, and representation simultaneously. Nevertheless, these studies generally examine welfare, precarity, and justice separately, leaving limited ontological integration explaining how marginalized workers themselves construct and experience welfare beyond utilitarian measurement.

This study addresses that theoretical fragmentation by proposing an ontological reconstruction of marginalized worker welfare through the integrated perspectives of precarity and social justice. Rather than treating welfare as an objective economic achievement, this research conceptualizes welfare as an existential condition emerging from the interaction between material security, institutional recognition, social participation, and human dignity (Kader, 2021; Walan et al., 2023). The originality of this study lies in synthesizing ontological inquiry with contemporary debates on labor precarity and justice, thereby extending existing welfare literature beyond conventional economic evaluation. Such reconstruction is increasingly necessary because policymakers require conceptual frameworks capable of representing the complex realities experienced by marginalized workers within rapidly transforming labor systems.

Based on these conceptual and empirical considerations, several fundamental research questions emerge. How should the welfare of marginalized workers be understood beyond utilitarian measurement? In what ways do experiences of labor precarity reshape the ontological meaning of welfare? How does the perspective of social justice contribute to reconstructing welfare as a multidimensional human condition rather than merely an economic outcome? Why do conventional welfare indicators fail to represent the lived

realities of marginalized workers adequately? Finally, what conceptual framework can integrate ontological understanding, precarity, and social justice into a more comprehensive explanation of worker welfare suitable for contemporary socioeconomic contexts?

This study argues that the welfare of marginalized workers cannot be adequately understood through utilitarian measurements alone because welfare fundamentally represents an ontological condition encompassing dignity, recognition, agency, security, and meaningful participation within society. Accordingly, labor precarity should be interpreted not merely as economic instability but as a structural process shaping human existence and social relations. By integrating ontological philosophy, precarity theory, and social justice perspectives, this research offers an original conceptual contribution that reconstructs worker welfare as a multidimensional phenomenon. The proposed framework is expected to enrich theoretical discourse while providing a stronger foundation for designing inclusive welfare policies that prioritize human flourishing over purely economic performance.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative conceptual research design aimed at reconstructing the ontological understanding of marginalized worker welfare beyond conventional utilitarian measurement (Braun et al., 2021). Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the research sought to critically examine the philosophical foundations, conceptual assumptions, and theoretical limitations underlying dominant welfare paradigms. A conceptual approach was selected because the objective of the study was not to measure welfare quantitatively but to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework capable of explaining the multidimensional realities experienced by marginalized workers within contemporary labor systems characterized by increasing precarity and structural inequality.

The study relied on an extensive review of scholarly literature obtained from internationally recognized academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and Google Scholar. The literature selection focused on publications released between 2014 and 2026 to capture recent developments concerning worker welfare, labor precarity, social justice, capability theory, and ontological perspectives. Keywords included worker welfare, marginalized workers, precarity, social justice, ontology, capability approach, labor insecurity, and utilitarian welfare. The analysis included only peer-reviewed journal articles, influential books, and highly cited theoretical works relevant to the research objectives.

Data analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach. Initially, the selected literature was systematically organized according to major conceptual domains, including utilitarian welfare measurement, ontological perspectives on welfare, labor precarity, and theories of social justice (Mundi et al., 2025). Subsequently, recurring concepts, theoretical assumptions, conceptual contradictions, and emerging themes were identified through iterative coding and comparative interpretation. The synthesis emphasized relationships among

concepts rather than statistical aggregation, enabling an integrated understanding of welfare that reflects the lived realities of marginalized workers beyond purely economic indicators.

To ensure conceptual rigor, the study employed source triangulation by comparing theoretical perspectives from economics, sociology, political philosophy, labor studies, and social policy (Kohn et al., 2024). Influential contributions from scholars such as Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Guy Standing, Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth, and other contemporary researchers were critically examined to identify convergences, divergences, and unresolved theoretical issues. Throughout the analysis, conceptual consistency, logical coherence, and philosophical validity were continuously evaluated to strengthen the credibility of the proposed ontological reconstruction and minimize interpretative bias.

The final stage involved developing a conceptual framework that reconstructs marginalized worker welfare through the integration of ontological inquiry, labor precarity, and social justice perspectives (Kekeya, 2023). Rather than positioning welfare solely as an economic outcome measured through income or productivity, the framework conceptualizes welfare as a multidimensional condition encompassing dignity, recognition, participation, security, and human flourishing. This reconstructed framework serves as the study's principal contribution by offering a theoretically grounded alternative for future empirical research and by providing policymakers with a broader perspective for evaluating and designing inclusive welfare policies for marginalized workers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings reveal that marginalized worker welfare cannot be sufficiently explained through conventional utilitarian indicators alone. Instead, welfare emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by labor precarity, institutional recognition, social participation, and justice. The following discussion interprets these findings by comparing them with existing theoretical perspectives while highlighting their implications for welfare theory, labor policy, and future conceptual development.

Ontological Welfare Extends Beyond Material Prosperity

The analysis demonstrates that marginalized worker welfare cannot be adequately understood through conventional utilitarian measurements emphasizing income, employment status, or productivity. The literature synthesis consistently reveals that welfare is fundamentally an ontological condition reflecting how individuals experience dignity, recognition, security, and meaningful participation within society. Although economic resources remain important, they constitute only one component of a broader human reality. Workers frequently evaluate their own welfare through subjective experiences of respect, autonomy, and social belonging rather than solely through measurable financial outcomes. Consequently, welfare emerges as an

existential experience instead of a purely economic achievement.

The conceptual analysis further indicates that marginalized workers often experience a discrepancy between statistical welfare and lived welfare. Individuals may appear economically productive according to official labor indicators while simultaneously enduring insecurity, exclusion, psychological distress, and limited institutional recognition. Such contradictions expose the inability of utilitarian measurement to capture multidimensional aspects of human existence. The findings therefore suggest that welfare should be interpreted as an integrated relationship among material conditions, social interactions, institutional protection, and individual dignity rather than as an isolated economic variable.

Another important finding concerns the ontological nature of human flourishing. The reviewed literature consistently positions welfare as a continuous process of becoming instead of a fixed economic outcome. Marginalized workers define meaningful welfare through opportunities to exercise agency, participate in decision-making, develop capabilities, and maintain social relationships that reinforce personal identity. These dimensions remain largely invisible within dominant welfare measurement systems that prioritize quantifiable economic indicators. Consequently, conventional assessments underestimate the complexity of human well-being experienced within precarious labor environments.

Overall, the findings reconstruct worker welfare as a multidimensional ontological phenomenon integrating material sufficiency with dignity, recognition, participation, and existential security. This reconstruction expands prevailing welfare paradigms beyond utilitarian assumptions and establishes a broader conceptual understanding capable of representing marginalized workers' lived realities. Rather than replacing economic indicators entirely, the proposed perspective repositions them as one element within a more comprehensive framework that recognizes welfare as an expression of human existence embedded in social justice and institutional relations.

Precarity Produces Multidimensional Welfare Vulnerabilities

The conceptual analysis identifies labor precarity as the principal mechanism generating multidimensional welfare deprivation among marginalized workers. Precarious employment extends beyond temporary contracts or unstable income because it systematically influences workers' security, institutional protection, bargaining capacity, psychological well-being, and future expectations. Rather than representing a purely economic condition, precarity reshapes how workers experience welfare across interconnected dimensions of human life. Consequently, understanding welfare requires examining the structural consequences of insecure employment rather than focusing exclusively on income-based indicators.

Table 1. Comparison Between Utilitarian Welfare and Ontological Welfare Under Labor Precarity

Dimension	Utilitarian Welfare Perspective	Ontological Welfare Perspective
Welfare indicator	Income and productivity	Dignity, recognition, participation, security
Employment status	Job availability	Quality and stability of work
Social protection	Secondary consideration	Fundamental welfare component
Human agency	Limited emphasis	Central element of welfare
Institutional recognition	Rarely measured	Essential for social justice
Psychological security	Frequently ignored	Integral dimension of welfare
Overall welfare	Economic achievement	Human flourishing

The comparison presented in Table 1 demonstrates that utilitarian welfare emphasizes measurable economic outcomes, whereas the ontological perspective interprets welfare as a multidimensional human experience. Labor precarity simultaneously weakens economic security, institutional recognition, and social participation, indicating that welfare deprivation cannot be reduced to financial hardship alone. These findings suggest that existing welfare indicators overlook several critical dimensions affecting marginalized workers' quality of life and long-term well-being.

Overall, the comparative analysis confirms that labor precarity generates interconnected vulnerabilities extending across economic, institutional, social, and psychological domains. Consequently, reconstructing welfare requires moving beyond conventional economic indicators toward an integrated framework capable of representing the complex realities experienced by marginalized workers. This finding strengthens the argument that welfare should be understood as an ontological condition shaped by structural justice rather than merely by labor market participation.

Social Justice Reconstructs Inclusive Welfare Frameworks

The conceptual synthesis demonstrates that social justice provides the normative foundation necessary for reconstructing worker welfare beyond utilitarian measurement. Welfare becomes meaningful when workers receive equitable opportunities, institutional recognition, participatory rights, distributive fairness, and protection against structural vulnerability. Therefore, justice functions not merely as redistribution but as a comprehensive framework that integrates dignity, recognition, and democratic participation into welfare evaluation.

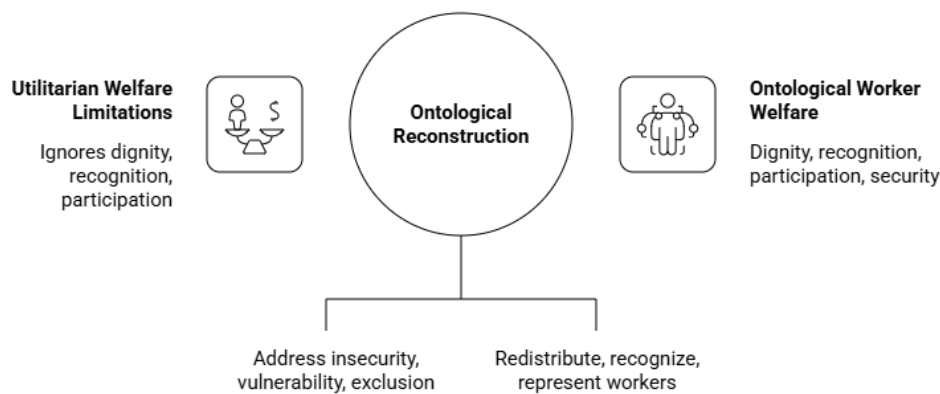


Figure 1. Ontological Reconstruction of Marginalized Worker Welfare

Figure 1 illustrates that the proposed reconstruction does not reject economic measurement but repositions it within a broader ontological framework. Labor precarity functions as the critical explanatory mechanism connecting limitations of utilitarian welfare with the necessity of social justice principles. Through this relationship, welfare evolves from a narrow economic indicator into a multidimensional condition encompassing dignity, participation, institutional recognition, and human flourishing.

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 represents the primary theoretical contribution of this study. By integrating ontology, labor precarity, and social justice into a unified explanatory model, the framework offers an alternative foundation for future welfare research and policy development. It enables scholars and policymakers to evaluate marginalized worker welfare more comprehensively while addressing dimensions that remain invisible within conventional utilitarian measurement systems.

Discussion

The first finding demonstrates that marginalized worker welfare extends beyond material prosperity, supporting the argument that welfare is fundamentally multidimensional rather than exclusively economic. This interpretation is broadly consistent with Chaika (2025) The Capability Approach, which emphasizes substantive freedoms rather than income as the principal indicator of human well-being, and Migdadi (2022) and Vani et al. (2024) capability framework, which positions dignity as an essential element of flourishing. However, the present study extends these perspectives by explicitly framing welfare as an ontological condition grounded in lived experience rather than solely as the realization of capabilities. Theoretically, this contributes a philosophical foundation for welfare studies, while practically encouraging policymakers to integrate recognition, participation, and dignity into welfare evaluation alongside traditional economic indicators.

The second finding identifies labor precarity as the structural mechanism generating multidimensional welfare deprivation. This conclusion aligns closely with Papapetrou et al. (2021) theory of the precariat, which describes insecurity as the defining characteristic of contemporary labor markets, and corresponds with empirical labor studies demonstrating that unstable employment weakens

social protection and long-term well-being. Nevertheless, this study differs by interpreting precarity not merely as labor market instability but as an ontological disruption influencing identity, security, and human existence (Bağçe et al., 2021; Palmtag, 2024; Pham, 2023). This theoretical expansion enriches existing precarity literature and suggests that labor reforms should prioritize institutional protection, employment stability, and psychological security rather than focusing exclusively on employment generation and productivity growth.

The third finding emphasizes that social justice reconstructs welfare by integrating redistribution, recognition, and representation into a unified conceptual framework. This interpretation strongly resonates with Ivanov (2021) multidimensional theory of justice while complementing Cristea et al. (2022) recognition theory, both of which argue that social equality requires more than distributive mechanisms. Unlike previous welfare models that often separate economic justice from social recognition, this research demonstrates that both dimensions are inseparable components of ontological welfare (Lee, 2023; Sinaini et al., 2024; Tübbicke, 2024). Theoretically, the proposed framework bridges welfare economics, political philosophy, and labor sociology. Practically, it encourages governments to design welfare policies that combine financial assistance with institutional inclusion, participatory governance, and legal recognition for marginalized workers.

Collectively, the three findings challenge the dominance of utilitarian welfare measurement by demonstrating that economic performance alone cannot adequately explain the lived realities experienced by marginalized workers. Previous studies generally acknowledge multidimensional welfare, labor precarity, or social justice independently, whereas this research integrates these concepts into a coherent ontological reconstruction. Such integration represents an important theoretical advancement because it connects philosophical assumptions regarding human existence with contemporary labor transformations. From a practical perspective, the findings imply that welfare assessment systems should incorporate qualitative dimensions including dignity, participation, institutional trust, and social belonging, thereby producing more comprehensive and socially responsive public policy evaluations.

Overall, this study contributes to the ongoing development of welfare scholarship by proposing an ontological perspective capable of reconciling economic evaluation with broader human experiences. Unlike conventional welfare frameworks that prioritize measurable outcomes, the proposed reconstruction positions welfare as a dynamic condition emerging through interactions among material security, institutional recognition, labor stability, and social justice. This perspective expands interdisciplinary dialogue across economics, sociology, philosophy, and public policy while opening opportunities for future empirical validation. Practically, the reconstructed framework offers policymakers, labor institutions, and social welfare agencies a more holistic conceptual foundation for designing inclusive welfare systems that prioritize human flourishing alongside sustainable economic development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that marginalized worker welfare should be reconstructed beyond utilitarian measurement by recognizing it as an ontological condition encompassing dignity, recognition, participation, security, and human flourishing. The most significant insight is that labor precarity and social justice are inseparable dimensions for understanding workers' lived realities and evaluating genuine welfare. The study contributes theoretically by integrating ontology, labor precarity, and social justice into a unified conceptual framework that advances contemporary welfare discourse. Nevertheless, the research is limited by its conceptual design and lack of empirical validation. Future studies should examine and refine the proposed framework through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method investigations across diverse labor sectors and socioeconomic contexts.

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