

Article

Domestic Cleaners in the Informal Labour Market: New Working Realities Shaped by the Gig Economy?

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Abstract

Previous studies show that gig economy-based work opens up new ways in which inequalities are (re)produced. In this context, it is particularly important to look at female cleaners in private households, where gender inequalities intersect with other axes of disadvantage such as class, migratory experience, or ascribed ethnicity. This spatially and linguistically fragmented group presents challenges for scientific research, which is reflected in insufficient data available to date. The aim of the project GigClean—from which research for this article is drawn—is to address this gap. The guiding research question is: How do domestic cleaners in the informal labour market experience working in the gig economy? The methodological design consists of 15 problem-centred interviews with platform-based cleaning labourers in private households in Vienna, who predominantly operate in the informal economy. Our results suggest that undeclared domestic work via online platforms is associated with increased power gaps between workers and clients as well as changing working conditions to the detriment of cleaners. Specifically, three recurring themes could be identified: reserve army mechanisms; lookism, objectification, and sexual harassment; and information asymmetry and control.

Keywords

digitalisation; domestic cleaning; gender; gig economy; household labour; informal economy; labour market; platform work; social reproduction; Vienna

Issue

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1. Introduction

In contemporary capitalist societies, the provisioning of domestic work has undergone and continues to undergo substantial transformations (Adkins & Dever, 2016). These transformations include the commodification of domestic labour and its externalisation to lower social classes, blurring the boundaries between markets and households (Kofman, 2014). Considering that capitalism fosters a permanent crisis of social reproduction (Federici, 2020), short-term domestic fixes represent individual solutions to structural injustice while opening up new markets for profit by transforming household work into a commercialised service relying on cheap and flexible labour.

In the course of the growing marketisation, gig economy platforms have emerged as new players in the sector of domestic work and position themselves as mediators between service providers and service seekers (Bor, 2021; Hunt & Samman, 2020; Keller & Schwiter, 2021; Tandon & Rathi, 2022; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). Thereby, a relation previously composed of two actors is extended to a triangular relationship consisting of for-profit companies, workers, and clients (Carvalho, 2019; Schmidt, 2017). Digital labour platforms play a crucial role in shaping consumer expectations and work relationships and carry the potential to reproduce, aggravate or alter power asymmetries (Barzilay, 2019). While previous studies show that work in the on-demand economy enables new ways of (re)producing inequalities, so

far little attention has been paid to platform-based working realities from a gender perspective. This is especially the case for cleaners in private households, where gender inequalities intersect with other axes of disadvantage such as class, migratory experience, or ascribed ethnicity (Palenga-Möllenebeck, 2022).

There are numerous challenges regarding social protection and occupational safety in this field. First, the cleaning sector is characterised by irregular working hours, low wages, and limited prospects for career advancement (Eichmann et al., 2014; Eurofound, 2014; Sardadvar, 2019; Schönherr & Zandonella, 2020). Second, given the missing co-presence of colleagues and the lack of social control in private environments, domestic cleaners find themselves in isolated and unprotected spaces (International Labour Organization, 2021; Sardadvar, 2022). Moreover, domestic service providers with limited access to social networks and the formal labour market are largely dependent on platforms to find clients. In addition, they face significant economic challenges and existential fears, considering, for example, the Covid-19 pandemic and its particularly severe impact on household employment opportunities (Sumalatha et al., 2021). Lastly, serious strains, such as language barriers (Gavanas, 2013), and work-related health problems, such as respiratory or skin diseases, are prevalent (Lee et al., 2021).

Overall, the fact that cleaning workers represent a spatially and linguistically fragmented group poses challenges for trade union strategies as well as for scientific research, which is reflected in the insufficient data available to date. Departing from this point, the research project GigClean was developed. The methodological design consists of 15 problem-centred interviews with female platform-based cleaners in private households in Vienna. The guiding research question is: How do domestic cleaners in the informal labour market experience working in the gig economy?

This article is structured as follows: First, we provide a brief overview of the need for research on domestic cleaning in the gig economy. We then present data and methods used for the study. Following from that, we illustrate our findings, which are organised around three themes: reserve army mechanisms; lookism, objectification, and sexual harassment; and information asymmetries and control. The article ends with a summary and conclusion.

2. Domestic Cleaning in the Gig Economy: The Need for Research

In recent years, gig economy-based labour has been on the rise (Kuhn, 2016). It is estimated that 1–3% of all paid work in advanced economies is mediated via digital platforms (Schwellnus et al., 2019). A study by Huws et al. (2019) on the role of platforms in 13 European countries found that between 4.7% (United Kingdom) and 28.5% (Czech Republic) of the working-age popula-

tion regularly use digital on-demand companies to find work. In response to this development, various scholars examined the working conditions of platform labourers. So far, most studies focus on ride-hailers and food deliverers operating for companies such as Uber or Deliveroo (e.g., Haba, 2023; Ivanova et al., 2018; Katta et al., 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Platform-mediated social reproductive work, such as domestic cleaning, however, has received comparably little attention in the literature to this date, reflecting an institutional gender bias (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018).

Given that gig economy platforms increasingly enter the field of domestic work (Blanchard & Hunt, 2022; Hunt & Samman, 2020; Tandon & Rathi, 2022), the question arises of how labour relationships between providers and seekers of household services are changing. Existing research in this field primarily highlights the implications of the design and functionality of cleaning platforms. For example, digital labour marketplaces can create substantial information asymmetries between domestic workers and clients (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022). More specifically, customers receive personal details about workers, e.g., name, years of experience, or profile picture, whereas household labourers are primarily presented job-related information, e.g., location, date, time, and duration of the respective gig (Gruszka et al., 2022). That differs from platforms operating in other segments, such as ride-hailing, and is particularly noteworthy, considering that workers in the domestic sector operate in intimate unprotected spaces. This imbalance can be exacerbated by unidirectional rating systems. Scholars emphasise that numerous platforms enable customers to rate their experience with cleaners, while workers are not equipped with the same option (Bor, 2021; Gerold et al., 2022). Moreover, it has been highlighted that the algorithmic rationale on certain platforms pushes domestic workers to accept gigs regardless of the associated conditions, since otherwise, their future job opportunities might be negatively impacted (Schwiter & Keller, 2020). In sum, existing studies suggest that gig economy companies operating in the domestic service sector have the potential to aggravate existing inequalities between labourers and clients. Developing an understanding of the logics of platforms connecting service providers with service seekers is crucial since the layout and the algorithms of virtual marketplaces structure work relationships to a great extent. Additionally, it is essential to conduct in-depth analyses to understand how these conditions translate into the lived experiences of household cleaners.

This is especially the case with informal job arrangements. Digital for-profit companies can facilitate access to work and income for marginalised groups (Van Doorn, 2021) and foster the impression of formalising employment relations. In many cases, however, they solely provide a connective interface for clients and cleaners without getting involved in the nature of their labour relationship or committing to employer responsibilities (Bor,

2021; Koutsimpogiorgos et al., 2023). In fact, the circumvention of local labour market laws and social protection regulations is described as a key characteristic of digital for-profit platforms (Haidar & Keune, 2021). Thus, Rodríguez-Modroño et al. (2022, p. 619) suggest that gig economy companies operating in the domestic field “fit perfectly in an informal and devalued care sector,” where working conditions are and continue to be characterised by precarity. Tandon and Rathi (2022) similarly regard the access to labourers through unregulated digital interfaces as a historical continuity of informal and exploitative working relations. Overall, the implications of gig work with regards to (in)formalisation are highly relevant to look at, not least due to the intensifying structural crisis of social reproduction (Fraser, 2017), and as unregistered work arrangements are expected to increase during periods of high inflation (Schneider & Boockmann, 2023).

With regard to around 6% of the working age population regularly providing services via platforms (Huws et al., 2019) and an approximate total of 900 million euros generated by undeclared cleaning work (Wenzel, 2019), it is particularly crucial to investigate the working realities of platform-mediated household cleaners in Austria. Estimates conclude that the majority of domestic cleaners in Austria work informally (Stadler, 2020, p. 6). In 2018, around one in seven households employed a domestic cleaner while 97% of them were hired through informal arrangements (Wiesböck, 2022). These numbers are not surprising, considering that only 64% of Austrians find undeclared labour in private households reprehensible (Eurobarometer, 2019, p. 93). Unregistered employment is associated with a lack of legal protection, collective bargaining and unionisation, insufficient job security and employer accountability, as well as limited access to labour and health insurance and pensions (Farinella & Arcidiacono, 2023). As profit-oriented platforms increasingly enter this largely unregulated segment, they carry the potential to reinforce and exacerbate prevailing conditions (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Tandon & Rathi, 2021). However, research elucidating the experiences of gig-based household labourers operating on the informal market in Austria is lacking to this date.

Therefore, the aim of our study is to analyse the working realities of platform-mediated domestic cleaners in the Austrian capital Vienna, since gig worker supply tends to be highest in urban areas (Strüver & Bauriedl, 2022). Our focus on the experiences of labourers is in line with ideas by Van Doorn (2017) who highlights the gendered, racialised, and classed distribution of vulnerabilities associated with gig-based work and calls for the necessity of directly approaching platform workers in order to better understand their perspectives and needs. Empirically, our sample is based on cleaners registered on *Betreut.at* (“takencareof.at”) and/or *Haushaltshilfe24* (“householdhelp24”), two of the leading platforms for domestic services in Austria. Working experiences related to these digital for-profit companies

are particularly relevant to look at as both firms operate on a subscription-based model, where clients and workers must pay a monthly membership fee. In contrast to commission-based platforms, these companies are not involved in the booking and payment process. Therewith, they lack a record-keeping system for completed gigs which entails additional security concerns for domestic cleaners.

3. Data and Methods

Our study comprises 15 problem-centred interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) with female platform-based cleaners working in private households in Vienna, with a focus on labour in the informal sector. The interview technique has been selected to collect and reconstruct knowledge about “problems” from the perspective of interview partners. Five interviews were conducted between July and August and ten between October and December 2022. Interviewees were selected by purposive sampling (Patton, 2014; Robinson, 2014) based on heterogeneity in terms of age, citizenship, the platform provider used, and employment conditions (e.g., informal work, formal employment, or self-employment). This well-established recruiting method allows for the identification and selection of information-rich cases that indicate availability and willingness to participate in the study. To reach respondents, the project team registered on the two household service platforms *Betreut.at* and *Haushaltshilfe24*, and directly messaged cleaners with the request for an anonymous interview. All interviewees were offered an incentive of 20 EUR in cash.

Participants were provided the opportunity to be interviewed in their first language. For this purpose, the project team collaborated with native speakers who have a background in social science (Enzenhofer & Resch, 2011). Due to sufficient language skills of the domestic cleaners under study, the research team was able to conduct most interviews (13 out of 15) in German. However, given that, with one exception, none of the respondents are German native speakers, the interview setting may carry the risk of compromising quality and validity of data (Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022, p. 14).

As Table 1 indicates, the age of the participants ranges from 27 to 60 years. While most interviewees were born in Eastern Europe or the Balkans, a fifth of the respondents was born in Austria and a third holds Austrian citizenship. In terms of the level of education, half of the participants graduated from high or secondary school, one person completed compulsory school and a third holds a university degree. The hourly wage indicated on the platforms amounts to 15,50 EUR on average. With regards to the employment form, five of the interviewees work exclusively in the informal market, while six persons combine informal and formal arrangements. The remaining four participants carry out registered work, either in the form of regular employment or self-employment.

Table 1. Sample.

| Name | Age | Place of birth | Citizenship | Years in Vienna | Children | Level of education | Platform | Hourly wage in euros |
|-----------|-----|----------------|-------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Marta | 60 | Austria | Austria | 41 | 2 | Tertiary | Haushaltshilfe24 | 12 |
| Valeria | 56 | Hungary | Hungary | 12 | 2 | Upper secondary | Haushaltshilfe24 | 15 |
| Karla | 23 | Poland | Poland | 1 | — | Tertiary | Haushaltshilfe24 | Any |
| Anna | 33 | Hungary | Hungary | 4 | 1 | Lower secondary | Haushaltshilfe24 | 10 |
| Kamila | 42 | Bosnia | Croatia | 3 | 1 | Upper secondary | Haushaltshilfe24 | 30 |
| Liana | 28 | Albania | Austria | 10 | — | Upper secondary | Betreut.at | 12 |
| Katarina | 32 | Austria | Austria | 32 | 2 | Upper secondary | Betreut.at | 17 |
| Anastasia | 27 | Georgia | Georgia | 8 months | — | Tertiary | Both | 17 |
| Gorana | 32 | Bosnia | Bosnia | 10 | 3 | Upper secondary | Both | 15 |
| Dilara | 44 | Austria | Austria | 44 | 3 | Upper secondary | Haushaltshilfe24 | 20 |
| Darja | 27 | Ukraine | Ukraine | 4 | — | Tertiary | Haushaltshilfe24 | 15 |
| Fatima | 52 | Russia | Russia | 22 | 2 | Upper secondary | Betreut.at | 15 |
| Nika | 27 | Georgia | Georgia | 5 | 1 | Tertiary | Betreut.at | 15 |
| Jelena | 28 | Serbia | Austria | 6 | — | Post-secondary non-tertiary | Betreut.at | 15 |
| Caecilia | 38 | Armenia | Greece | 5 months | — | Upper secondary | Betreut.at | 10 |

Note: All names have been pseudonymised; hourly wage as indicated on the gig economy platform.

The interviews cover important points of the social and economic process of domestic cleaning in the gig economy. The interview guideline was divided into thematic modules and compiled questions on respondents' working conditions, professional biography, financial situation, experiences with clients and the platform, health status, social networks, and support systems, among others. Even though the interviews were thematically structured, participants were encouraged to set their own narratives about significant events in their professional lives.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and personally identifiable information was altered or respectively replaced with pseudonyms. The interviews were analysed according to qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012, 2014) applying a deductive-inductive approach. The analysis aimed to develop thematic codes and compare passages with similar topics spread throughout interviews. The passages were then tied together, leading to the final step of the analysis: the conceptualisation and theoretical generalisation of the material. In the following section, the results are presented.

4. Working On-Demand: One-Sided Distribution of Risks and Responsibilities

4.1. Reserve Army Mechanisms

As Van Doorn (2017, p. 904) highlights, the platform economy “thrives off a surplus population of underemployed gig workers whose fungibility and superfluity is orchestrated through digital platform architectures.” Our study results indicate that the visible oversupply of labourers on the platform websites indeed contributes to reserve army mechanisms and therewith to increasing competition among domestic workers. This, in turn, increases wage pressure and underpayment, as reflected in the following passages:

There are many of us...there are an awful lot of people....It is terrible how many people there are, all sorts of nationalities. And the problem is that I see people taking jobs for nine, ten euros. (Valeria)

If you tell them nine, ten euros per hour, they still want to bargain down. (Liana)

I could take more, I've already gotten more [than ten euros] from several people, but I deliberately don't do it, because generally people just scroll further and look for someone for less money. (Anna)

By encompassing a large pool of workforce, platforms do not only enhance competitive relations among labourers (Vallas & Schor, 2020) and incentivise low wage rates but also create a culture of exchangeability. In fact, the prevalent reserve army mechanisms enable clients to dismiss and easily replace workers at any time. The constant pressure and threat of being substituted pose existential challenges for platform labourers, e.g., in case of illness or non-immediate reply to messages and requests:

You are really powerless when you are sick. If you cancel once, if you are sick, there are people who do not like it. Then they immediately look for someone else. (Anna)

The clients, they sometimes write to ten, fifteen people and take those who answer the fastest. If they [the workers] do not fit after all, they simply take others. (Anna)

Since labour-related risks are not carried by clients or the platform but entirely by the disposable workforce, domestic cleaners are put on call for gigs that could be cancelled at the last minute:

I came...but he texted me: "Ah, sorry, I'm in a restaurant with a friend, come to this place, I'll give you the keys."...And I also had a situation where I drove to someone's house and the person texted me: "Sorry, I changed my mind." (Karla)

Given cost-of-living pressures, a short notice cancellation can have severe implications for cleaners, in particular the loss of time, transportation costs, and hourly pay. While in many formal service job settings a cancellation fee is required to compensate for the financial loss, no remuneration options are offered to workers in the informal sector. Overall, reserve army mechanisms and access to a large pool of potential labourers on the platform websites can considerably alter dynamics of power compared to traditional informal work relationships in this field, e.g., when access to domestic cleaners relies on recommendations from friends and acquaintances. Additionally, both clients and platform companies profit from transferring full responsibility, costs, and risks of employment onto workers, including lost revenue, liability for physical harm, damage to equipment and property, coverage between gigs, or financial malfeasance by customers (Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 280). This renders the already marginalised group of household labourers even more vulnerable. Given the uneven distribution of power, female cleaners are at high risk of being exposed to abuse and

unwanted sexual advances, as illustrated in the following section.

4.2. *Lookism, Objectification, and Sexual Harassment*

Numerous studies have revealed that domestic workers frequently experience sexual harassment (Figueiredo et al., 2018; Ribeiro Corossacz, 2019). While in general a significant share of women does not report assaults to the police due to the fear of not being believed and the stigma associated with being a victim of sexual crime (Landström et al., 2016; Perilloux et al., 2014), domestic cleaners face additional systemic barriers to act against abusive behaviour, such as a lack of language proficiency and knowledge of their rights or fear of legal institutions (Papadakaki et al., 2021). At the same time, inequalities, such as gender, class, and dependency on income from unregulated work, put them at greater risk of facing harassment (International Labour Organization, 2021), which is also reflected in our study:

The man said... "Why don't you want to earn more money like that?" With cleaning you earn ten euros per hour. And he said: "Okay, I'll pay you fifteen but give me, like, this massage or something."...And he said: "Take this oil and do something. But not just massage, a little bit of massage, a little bit of play." (Darja)

I don't know why it is so common at the moment, but I heard it from many people and then I [had] the same experience: Someone texted me if I could send my underpants and he would give me money. (Anastasia)

Men have written to me: "Ah, you are mega cute" with a heart emoji or something....It was such old men too. So many....One asked me if I'm, like, really cleaning or why [am I] there. And then I asked: "Yeah, I'm there because of that, I'm looking for [a] job. And what are you looking for?" He wrote: "Yes, I am looking for something else." And I didn't write anything [else], and then [in the] next few days he wrote [asking] if I have breast milk or something. (Nika)

Other experiences made by the interviewees under study include requests for cleaning naked, in shorts, underwear, or tights, demands for sending nudes, unwanted masturbation content, constantly being stared at while working, clients openly talking about sexual fantasies, invitations to have drinks together, and clients asking them to move in with them. Such degrading and objectifying actions are clear violations of workers' integrity and personal space. According to the interviewees, some users registered on the platform are not looking for domestic service but rather for sexual encounters with domestic service providers. This needs to be seen in the light of the hierarchical nature of the informal setting as well as the enduring cultural-historical stereotyping,

fetishisation, and eroticisation of “cleaning ladies” and “maids” in mainstream films and porn culture (Delap, 2011; Wade, 2013). Additionally, it is important to point to the portrayal of workers on the platforms’ websites, where the visual presentation of labourers is prioritised, in the sense that their portrait photos take up the largest share of their profiles (Wiesböck, 2023). This can lead to the promotion of the idea that attractiveness and self-presentation skills are key selection criteria for clients:

There are people who do this for a few months and never get a message. But it wasn’t like that for me. And that’s why I think it was because of the picture. So, my face is a bit childlike in this photo, and at that time I was so cute. And I think that’s why. (Nika)

Sometimes men write to me that I’m pretty or that I’m too pretty to clean....Sometimes some of them say: “Ah, then we’ll take her because she’s well-groomed,” you know, that’s how they assess it, right? (Karla)

The passages reflect that cleaners under study are confronted with and aware of lookist practices (Warhurst et al., 2009) and the expectation of digitally portraying their physical appearance in appealing ways to increase their chances of receiving requests. Altogether, the accounts of objectification and the experiences with customers looking for erotic encounters on the platform reflect the symbolic and material violence that cleaners face (Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022) as well as their lack of power to fight abusive behaviour online and on site. This is particularly notable considering that both digital platforms do not provide any option to report or combat inappropriate conduct and harassment from clients, as described in the following section.

4.3. Information Asymmetry and Control

Subordination, imbalance of authority, proximity to and direct reliance on the employer are common characteristics of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers (UN Women, 2020, p. 19). Such power asymmetries are also reflected in the website design of the two platforms, where customers receive detailed personal information about cleaners, while workers are only informed about gig-related data. This goes in line with previous research in this field (Gerold et al., 2022; Gruszka et al., 2022) and can leave domestic service providers uncertain about who is sending the request:

What really bothers me is that you don’t always know who you’re dealing with. (Anna)

For example, some people don’t have a profile picture....They want information, such as your CV or phone number, but you yourself don’t know what’s going on. (Caecilia)

According to Maffie (2023), withholding information from workers can be understood as a market mechanism that gig economy platforms use to cultivate worker dependence. Those hierarchies can be enhanced and expanded through one-sided rating systems which exclusively ask workers to prove their trustworthiness. Such unidirectional rating techniques are frequently observed among gig economy firms in the domestic sector (Bor, 2021; Gerold et al., 2022; Rathi & Tandon, 2021). The subscription-based platforms *Betreut.at* and *Haushaltshilfe24* operate in the same manner. Both designed their website in a way that all users registered as clients are enabled to rate domestic workers based on a five-star rating system—regardless of whether they booked their cleaning service or not. This grants customers a high degree of immunity (Van Doorn, 2017, p. 898). At the same time, it puts pressure on gig workers to fulfil and comply with expectations that go beyond the household labour itself, such as the timeliness of responding to requests:

If I cannot answer someone, because I did not notice [their message], they write a review....And then they just give one star....And that is my life and that is my work and my profession at the moment, and you, you ruin everything just for an unanswered message. (Anastasia)

You can just give a bad rating just to annoy someone, even though it’s not true. I cannot delete it after all, right? I mean it is visible for all the others then. Yes. And that is actually bad for my profile. (Dilara)

One-way rating mechanisms give any platform user registered as a client the power to impact domestic workers’ opportunity structures for future gigs and threaten their ability to continue finding jobs (Tandon & Rathi, 2022, p. 14). Therewith, platform-based reputation systems are a form of digital control (Wood et al., 2019) aiming to structure the behaviour of the workforce in a way that customers’ opinions and wishes dictate how work is done (Fuller & Smith, 1991). Algorithmic management techniques in the gig economy enforce this control over workers through sanctions and rewards (Newlands, 2023; Wood et al., 2019), fostering the expectation of continuous digital availability, which then becomes a new job requirement for domestic low-wage workers:

I try to reply and it happened to me once or twice that a lady wrote to me and I was stressed and I didn’t reply that day and the next day I go to the platform, and she deleted the message. I could not answer, yes. I was at work. (Kamila)

In my private time, yes. When I see an email, I immediately look at it, even [during] my working hours, in my real job I do it too, I look to be able to see what the

customer has written or to be able to answer quickly. (Katarina)

Keller (2022) similarly highlights the anticipation of constant availability and describes it as an encroachment on workers' lives. The dissolution of boundaries in terms of working time, the accelerated pace and expectations of unlimited accessibility, and the permanent "being on call" for new gig possibilities may not only contribute to inequalities between workers with and without elaborate German language skills but also create interaction and availability overload as well as technostress (Borle et al., 2021; Chiappetta, 2017). Given that household workers operate in private spaces and are mostly excluded from labour rights and protections common in other workplaces (Marchetti, 2022), trust-signalling criteria and tools to evaluate clients would be of particular relevance. The one-sided rating functions reflect unequal terms between the parties involved and put platform workers at an unfair disadvantage and security risk. Altogether, these power imbalances result from strategic design decisions of gig economy platforms and carry the potential to alter the landscape of domestic labour with crucial implications for working conditions.

5. Conclusion

This article aims to shed light on the working realities of domestic cleaners in the digital gig economy in Vienna, who predominantly operate in the informal sector. Overall, our results point towards increased power gaps between workers and clients as well as changing working conditions to the detriment of cleaners.

In terms of labour conditions in the on-demand economy, the study offers insights into reserve army mechanisms that are reinforced by the visible oversupply of profiles on digital platforms. Such dynamics can lead to wage degradation, the pressure to immediately respond to requests, and the threat of being permanently replaced if workers are forced to cancel a gig, e.g., due to illness. The unilateral shift of entrepreneurial responsibilities and risks to domestic service providers results in a range of advantages for clients and gig economy platforms, especially the exemption from costs in the case of partial or complete service cancellations from their side. However, for marginalised and unprotected low-wage workers in the informal labour market segment, this subjectification of work and the increasing requirements and demands related to platform work can severely impact their ability to plan and predict their monthly income and renders the organisation of their daily work routines a challenging task.

A further aspect contributing to arduous working conditions are regular experiences of objectification and sexual harassment both virtually and on site. In general, service providers in private households are exposed to this form of violence to a large extent (Figueiredo et al., 2018; Papadakaki et al., 2021; Ribeiro Corossacz, 2019).

Working in the gig economy can expand the risk for cleaners of experiencing sexual harassment to the digital space. Due to the privacy of the domestic work environment, the informal setting of the labour relation, and the lack of support from platforms regarding safety and protection, it is particularly difficult to prevent, expose, and fight mistreatment and exploitation in this labour market segment. Related to that, interviewees perceive a growing importance of their visual appearance for job opportunities. Such experiences with lookism appear to be reinforced through the design logic of the platform websites and constitute an additional form of labour market discrimination for domestic cleaners. Taken together, home-based reproductive work has to be seen as an articulation of race, class, and gender inequalities, in which images and practices of degradation are pervasive, including aspects of sexualisation that are historically linked to domestic servitude (Mayer, 2021).

Finally, serious information asymmetries and control mechanisms between customers and cleaners are created by the subscription-based platforms. Whereas workers primarily receive job-related information, service seekers are provided with person-specific details about cleaners. In addition, the opportunity to rate the experience with service providers is restricted to users registered as clients—irrespective of whether they purchased a service or not. In practice, these evaluations do not always reflect the subjectively perceived quality of the cleaning service. For example, cleaners under study also experience being evaluated negatively if they do not respond promptly to requests from clients. In this respect, (potential) customers are granted significant and lasting power to structure prospective job opportunities for workers (Hertwig & Papsdorf, 2022). One-way evaluation systems of this kind do not only serve quality control and matching purposes but are part of a broader shift in the exercise of control over workers who operate "under a regime of structural domination" (Flanagan, 2019, p. 71). As such, they serve a disciplining function, ensuring that workers behave in a "socially desirable" manner, considering that the acquisition of future gigs depends on their online ratings (Gandini, 2019). Consequently, generating a subordinate position and differential setting on the part of domestic workers reaffirms power status of clients and platforms alike.

Altogether, our study results provide further evidence that gig economy companies do not act as neutral intermediaries or matchmakers, but actively influence work processes and opportunities through forms of control to the benefit of customers and their own interests. Digital enterprises are vital in (re)producing sets of norms and ideas around domestic service and shaping conditions and practices within work relations. Platforms and clients exert authority over labourers through embedded tools and technologies such as ratings, information asymmetries, and algorithmic monitoring, thus restricting workers' autonomy and bargaining power (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Gandini, 2019). For the

economically and socially marginalised group of female cleaners, the use of platforms may not only imply intensified wage pressure and unsafe working conditions but also extended job requirements including digital availability and self-presentation skills. Such dynamics can contribute to new professional standards in the informal low-wage sector, namely the orientation towards a digital entrepreneurial self (Bröckling, 2015).

Overall, it is crucial to consider the externalisation and marketisation of domestic work as a symptom of the structural crisis of social reproduction inherent in late capitalist economic systems (Federici, 2020). Profit-oriented gig economy platforms make use of this social malaise to realise new surplus opportunities in a largely unregulated market that is mainly occupied by a female migrant workforce under precarious conditions. This “care fix” (Dowling, 2022) allows for the continuous pursuit of profitability, sustains the gendered division of domestic chores, and signifies an ongoing coloniality of labour (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010, 2014). Platform-based household work thus becomes a “hyper-commodified form of labour” (Wood et al., 2019) and the domestic service market a site of multiple exploitations, in many cases perpetuating economic inequalities as well as gendered class dynamics (Haas, 2001). Accordingly, in addition to a comprehensive scientific inquiry, substantial supranational regulation on workers’ rights regarding the provision and purchasing of domestic labour is essential.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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