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Professionalization from above in domestic work: Accessing work on marketplace platforms

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journals.sagepub.com/home/crs**Khaoula Ettarfi** 

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Abstract

Domestic work has always been a quintessential example of invisible labour. In this article, I explore how workers build individual visibility on marketplace platforms. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with workers who use different marketplace platforms in Geneva and surrounding areas to find domestic work, I show how visibility on marketplace platforms requires invisible work and a different set of skills, competencies, codes of conduct and client management. I argue that visibility on marketplace platforms can be interpreted as a form of professionalization from above. On one hand, visibility becomes a barrier to entry in finding work. The different requirements for building visibility lead to an institutionalization of standardized skills and practices necessary to access work on the platform. On the other hand, marketplace platforms ignore the formality of the employment relationship and decent wages, which are externalized and managed between workers and the platform clients.

Keywords

Gig work, marketplace platforms, domestic work, visibility, profiles, ratings, professionalization

Introduction

Domestic work has always been an example of invisible and devalued labour. Even when professionally undertaken, domestic work remains precarious and informal (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Moreover, work inside private households is characterized by asymmetrical power relationships shaped by differences in the migratory status, ethnicity, and class between households and those who work within them (Jokela, 2017; Parrenas, 2000; Williams, 2012). In addition, private households often neglect their responsibilities as employers (Jokela, 2017).

Domestic work as a service provided through the market has benefitted, on one hand, from a neoliberal narrative that relegates the work of social reproduction as a ‘private matter’ to individual

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households (Craig, 2020). On the other hand, it has benefitted from demographic aging in the Global North and retreating welfare systems. However, different scholars have been critical of the commodification and marketization of domestic work (Cox, 2013; McDowell, 2014; Power and Hall, 2018; Schwiter et al., 2018). The commodification of domestic work implies different constellations of relationships and dependencies among market providers, private households, and workers, predominantly migrant women (Cox, 2013; Farris, 2020). In such contexts, the entry of domestic services platforms is seen as another form of reorganizing the market for domestic work and concurrently re-shifting the boundaries of the productive and reproductive while extracting value (Van Doorn, 2022). Domestic service platforms are the new players in the domestic economy, matching workers with private households. Van Doorn (2022) points out that the entry of domestic service platforms adheres to a logic that assumes the ‘self-sufficiency’ of private households in maintaining social reproduction and access through ‘the integrated circuit of capital accumulation’. For Rodríguez-Modroño et al. (2022), domestic service platforms represent a ‘low-cost response’ to the commodification of domestic work amid the rising care crisis.

In Switzerland, domestic service platforms started receiving media attention around 2015 as the new ‘Uber’ for domestic work (Mudrecki, 2015). However, an online search shows that domestic service platforms were already present on the market despite receiving scant attention. Domestic service platforms are generally divided into two types. The first are on-demand platforms where the platform manages how workers are matched with the clients. On-demand platforms also define the pay rates for the services and either charge a fee once the service is provided, or in other cases, they act as direct employers dispatching workers according to demand and availabilities and offering a salary. In most cases, ‘workers are dispatched interchangeably’ (Ticona et al., 2018: 23) on on-demand platforms. The second group – which is the focus of this paper – consists of marketplace platforms wherein the clients and workers make the match themselves. Marketplace platforms are a common model for care work across different countries. Rather than being directly matched with a worker through the platform, as mentioned by Ticona et al. (2018: 23), marketplace platforms ‘position themselves as tools that allow consumers to make hiring judgements about individuals offering their services’. Therefore, the question of the visibility of workers, how they present themselves, and how they interact with the platform clients are more prominent and determine access to matches and work. Marketplace platforms rely on different tools to promote the visibility of workers to the platform clients such as profiles, ratings, and performance scores. In addition, some marketplace platforms also provide integrated payment interfaces, automated payments, and contract templates. However, most marketplace platforms do not take responsibility for the formalization of the employment relationship and the employment relationship is managed by the workers and the platform clients who are the direct employers. In addition, while most marketplace platforms on the Swiss market are free to join, some charge additional fees to workers, including for operating costs or for added benefits, such as accessing the phone numbers of the platform clients or improving worker visibility.

By focusing on marketplace platforms in the domestic economy, this article addresses the question of the (in)visibilities of workers. Building on qualitative interviews conducted with workers about their working experiences, I find that building individual visibility on platforms is crucial for accessing work in the domestic economy. However, I argue that building visibility on marketplace platforms can be interpreted as a form of professionalization from above since it requires new skills beyond only the ones necessary for domestic work, having a professional identity on the platform, and following specific codes of conduct and practices when interacting with the platform clients. At the same time, the findings show that while platforms institutionalize access to domestic work through individual visibility, the formality of the employment relationship and access to decent wages is externalized and managed between workers and the platform clients also in such case the

employers. In consequence, the findings suggest that domestic services platforms engage in a professionalization from above which aims at improving the quality of domestic services provided through the platform while not improving workers' status.

In the following, I first review literature on invisible work and gig work, engaging with the question of the visibility of workers on platforms. Second, I outline the research method and context of the study. In the third section, I present the findings of the paper by drawing on a series of vignettes. Following this, I discuss the findings before I conclude.

(In)visible work in the domestic gig economy

The struggle for the visibility of domestic work has a long history in feminist scholarship, Marxist-feminist debates from the 1970s and social movements (England, 2017). Yet work in the domestic economy has remained an example of invisible work (Hochschild and Ehrenreich, 2004). Dating back to the work of Kaplan Daniels (1987), who coined the term, invisible work refers to the unpaid work conducted by women, which is seen as 'culturally and economically devalued' (Hatton, 2017).

According to Hatton (2017: 337), in a survey of the literature, invisible work tends to be work that is 'physically out of sight', 'ignored or overlooked', 'socially marginalized', 'economically and/or culturally devalued', 'legally unprotected' or 'some combination thereof'. The author also points out different mechanisms – either operating separately or in combination with one another – that devalue labour. First, cultural mechanisms that subscribe to hegemonic ideologies are related to identity factors such as gender, race and class. Second, legal mechanisms exclude certain forms of work from formal employment definitions, and third, spatial mechanisms characterize specific domestic worksites as outside spaces of 'real' work.

As cited by England (2017), part of the devaluation of domestic work – both paid and unpaid – is because it is performed in the home, which represents an invisible site and is not often considered a site of 'real work'. Domestic work is also rendered invisible through other intersecting mechanisms. For instance, sociocultural mechanisms include the constant demand for emotional labour and the naturalization of the skills required for domestic work even when professionally performed. Others have also noted other sociolegal mechanisms such as legally excluding domestic work on the basis of it being either non-economic or informal (Cox, 2006; Dowling, 2016; Glenn, 2000; Hatton, 2017; Macdonald, 1998).

The rise of marketplace platforms and their entry into the market for domestic services for private households prompts questions regarding the value afforded to domestic workers and the (in)visibility of workers and accessibility to work. Existing research on work across different gig economies remains doubtful about workers' visibilities (see Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2014; Cherry, 2011; Hatton, 2017; Irani, 2015a, 2015b). Most importantly, Gruszka and Böhm (2020) introduce a framework of three types of (in)visibilities when performing platform work: the 'perceptible', 'institutional' and 'individual'. According to the authors, the perceptible (in)visibility aligns with the already existing notion of invisible work and refers to 'the (in)ability to see and perceive platform workers "in the flesh" and their work "on the spot" – be it in the eyes of clients, other workers, or the surrounding general public'. However, institutional visibility relates to the governance of platforms and, therefore, to questions around the 'formalization of employment' and workers being granted the legal status of workers. Finally, the individual visibility 'describe[s] how the interactions between platforms, workers, and clients occur' and is shaped by elements related to algorithmic management, online profiles, ratings and reviews.

In the context of work on platforms in the domestic economy, research on the platform Care.com prompts us to look with more nuances at the visibility afforded to workers. According to

Ticona and Mateescu (2018), work on platforms can increase the individual visibility of workers through reviews and ratings. However, since the platform does not enforce any legal compliance with local employment regulations, workers are often left outside the scope of institutional visibility and formal employment. Similarly, in another study on work on domestic services platforms, van Doorn (2021) argues that platforms build an individualized form of visibility through ratings, reviews and profiles. The purpose of this visibility is mainly to facilitate the matching and the trust between workers and the platform clients, where the latter can easily access and compare workers. Concurrently, domestic services platforms seldom enforce any institutional visibility required for workers to be formally employed. Hence, platforms instead engage in 'selective formalization', or 'a set of business practices that formalize some aspects of the gig while perpetuating and sometimes aggravating certain conditions of informality that have long characterized domestic labour' (Van Doorn, 2021: 51).

In a qualitative study, investigating workers' profiles on the platform Care.com across three different locations in the United States, Fetterolf (2022) finds that visibility on the platform was linked to elements related to 'response time', 'availability' and 'activity on the platform'. These elements were key to separating the top and bottom profiles on the platform. This finding aligns with previous findings from interviews with workers on care work marketplaces conducted by Ticona et al. (2018). Individual visibility on such platforms and securing work required new skills related to 'self-branding', 'online impression management' and 'attention to metrics like message response rates'.

In another study on grocery delivery and domestic work platforms, Orth (2024) finds that accessing work and good pay were linked to having basic digital and language skills. Moreover, the author highlights the importance of branding and customer management skills. Therefore, domestic services platforms (and notably, marketplace platforms) are changing the skills required to access care work. These platforms emphasize the need to master 'digital fluency', going beyond only understanding the technical features to also engaging with 'the unspoken cultural norms that shape activity on these platforms' (Ticona et al., 2018: 26). However, not only is the work that goes into building individualized visibility uncompensated, but it also creates new inequalities in accessing work among workers on the platforms who do not all have the needed skills nor the time to invest in cultivating them (Fetterolf, 2022; Orth, 2024).

Positive reviews and ratings were crucial for having one's profile listed at the top of care work platforms and therefore being more visible to the platform clients (Fetterolf, 2022). This is similar to other studies that highlight the importance of visibility attained through reviews and ratings in different gig economies (Graham and Anwar, 2019; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2021). However, what is particular to profiles on care work and domestic services platforms is that they also serve to convey trustworthiness. In such cases, trustworthiness is constructed by highlighting profile attributes that naturalize care work, such as a passion for children, childcare as 'more than a job' or having 'a passion for the job' (Fetterolf, 2022). Yet despite such emphasis on the naturalization of care work skills, in a comparison of profiles on Care.com, most profiles also listed some form of educational background or degrees, which appears to be an unofficial requirement on the platform (Fetterolf, 2022).

The scholarship on (in)visibility on domestic services platforms prompts us to look more critically at the visibility afforded to workers. In addition, it also triggers questions about its impacts on work accessibility. Especially in the context of care work on marketplace platforms, hiring decisions are intertwined with other subjective factors that are linked to the identity and personal attributes of the workers. Such visibility could exacerbate inequalities among workers in terms of work access (Ticona et al., 2018). Moreover, not all workers benefit from easy and fast access to work on marketplace platforms as previously highlighted in the literature on gig work (Altenried, 2021). For example, drawing on autoethnographic data as a platform worker in Switzerland, Keller (2023)

demonstrates the difficulties of accessing first gigs and details the experience of feeling excluded from the gig economy and the insecurity it entails. In addition, as Floros and Jørgensen (2023) reported in their study on migrant housecleaners working on platforms in Denmark, workers also experience different levels of precarity and challenges due to various work permits.

Context of the study and methods

In Switzerland, work in the domestic economy is subject to a national standard contract of employment (SCE) for domestic staff that indicates the minimum wage for domestic work inside private households (Lempfen and Salem, 2017). In addition, such work is also subject to cantonal standard contracts of employment that determine working hours, rest periods and may set higher minimum wage levels than the national requirement. In Geneva, the general minimum wage in 2024 amounted to 24.32 francs (Loi cantonale sur l'inspection et les relations du travail (LIRT), 2024). Yet, despite different initiatives like the introduction of simplified declaration procedures (e.g. *chèque-service*) that allow private households to declare domestic workers as their employees and pay their social insurance contributions, work in the domestic economy remains largely informal. Existing research highlights the prevalence of feminized and migrant labour with a large share of workers holding a vulnerable residency status in the domestic economy. Drawing on figures collected by the Interprofessional Union of Workers (SIT), Flückiger and Pasche (2005) estimated that around 5000 domestic workers were previously hired as part of the informal economy in Geneva. Based on the same estimates, women were more likely to work as informal domestic workers than men. The workers' migratory status further affects the sector's working conditions, including low wages and the absence of protection. Ultimately, the working conditions in the sector remain contingent on whether the employment is formal (Flückiger and Pasche, 2005).

Between April 2022 and October 2023, I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with 20 workers who use different types of domestic services platforms to find work in Geneva. I approached the interviewees in the sample through two means. First, since workers on domestic services platforms are largely invisible in public spaces, I got in touch with a labour union in Geneva that enabled me to access three of the interviewees. Second, in line with other ethnographic studies on domestic services platforms (see Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Van Doorn, 2021), I recruited workers through posting an advertisement about the scope of my research on an online platform equivalent to Craigslist. While my recruitment method was challenging and took time, it allowed me to protect the anonymity of the workers. I was only able to recruit one participant through the snowballing method as most of my interviewees were either not in touch with other workers on the platform or their contacts were unavailable to be interviewed.

I conducted multiple interviews with selected workers to better understand how platform-mediated labour (re)shapes the lives of workers in the domestic economy. I relied on semi-structured interviews to capture the workers' everyday experiences framed in their own words (Rossman et al., 2022). The interview guide centred around themes related to work trajectories before they began work in the domestic work economy and on platforms, first work experiences on digital platforms, everyday work practices and daily experiences, relationships with the platform and the clients, questions around pay and income, and migrant histories.

All interviewees worked predominantly in the city of Geneva and its surroundings. Most of the participants were women (19) and had a migrant background, with a few exceptions. For workers with a migrant background, they predominantly came from countries in South America (nine) but also from other European (five) and African countries (three). Most interviewees were already established in Switzerland and had various migratory statuses. Some either migrated to Switzerland independently to look for work or in the context of a family reunification. In addition, workers also

had varying educational backgrounds, and some had already experience in the domestic economy before joining platforms. Some workers also relied on work on domestic services platforms for a side income in addition to their main job or during periods of unemployment.

Work on marketplace platforms: Visibility as an entry requirement for domestic gig work

The invisible requirements behind individual visibility

Camilla almost gave up when she joined marketplace platforms after moving to Geneva from Peru and following a short stay in Spain to get her documents in order. Camilla first tried finding work through recommendations from friends. She also left small advertisements in mailboxes, which went unanswered, before some friends told her about platforms. But unlike the positive experiences she had heard about, Camilla remembers,

it's true that at first it didn't work. I wrote lots of messages. I sent many messages to people, and they didn't reply. For a year, it was really for me. I said no, the platforms don't work for me. Really, it's not for me because I really couldn't see any return. But then, the following year, on one of the platforms, I had quite a few people contacting me, and I found quite a lot of work on it.

If Camilla's luck turned around, it was mainly because she was spending even more time connected on the platforms than when she first began, and was constantly following up on work requests – a strategy that still only paid off on one of the platforms she was using. Camilla also started investing more in building her profile page and crafting better messages to the platform clients after taking French courses:

What helps the most! Well, I think it's really to create a good profile, I think. A good profile means really taking the time to write it . . . At first, yes, it was a bit complicated to know how to explain myself. It's more like how to sell myself. Saying my qualities, who I am, what I can do, what I'm capable of . . . for my qualities, well, I would put that I was a patient person. That I liked children, that I liked doing activities with them, that I liked to do crafts, for example. And then I added the years of experience I'd had . . . And apart from the profile there's also the option to add your CV, or letters of motivation, the diplomas you've got. So, I've started adding that too and I think it's been a plus too.

Marketplace platforms offer centralized access to job announcements and potential employers. For most of the workers I interviewed, platforms were becoming their main way of finding work, as most job announcements had shifted away from traditional means, such as leaving ads on advertisement boards in major supermarkets in the city or dropping announcements in mailboxes in residential neighbourhoods or day cares. Hence, marketplace platforms were becoming essential for finding work and establishing a form of visibility in the domestic work labour market.

At first glance, marketplace platforms offer a simple, fast and paper-free onboarding process. For most of these platforms, an email address and a phone number are enough to create and verify an account and access work announcements. However, there are other marketplace platforms – which the workers I interviewed refrained from using – that asked for a criminal record check and further information that most felt were too sensitive to simply hand over to a company they found on the Internet. Thus, marketplace platforms that are free and easy to join can offer advantages to workers who worry about data privacy issues, lack a residency permit or cannot afford to pay for a subscription. However, marketplace platforms that are free to join also rely on a business model centred around onboarding as many workers as possible without offering any support for matching

with potential employers. This is similar to findings from studies on the remote gig economy (Wood et al., 2019) and on marketplace care platforms (Ticona et al., 2018). In fact, platforms that do not take any cuts from workers are ‘less incentivized to match workers or to intervene in work performance’ (Ticona et al., 2018: 23). That means that accessing work on marketplace platforms was not always immediate, especially for work related to childcare.

When it comes to accessing work, workers were often faced with what Veen et al. (2020) describe as the opacity of how work is organized on platforms, and most were unclear about the presence or role of any algorithmic management of profiles. From the worker perspective described by Camilla, it seemed that having a good profile could improve one’s individual visibility to the platform clients and increase access to work. In their profiles, workers can first log a short description about themselves which they were encouraged to do through the promotional emails sent to them by some of the platforms. Some spoke of the description section as a mini-motivation letter or a pitch to get an interview. The interest in children and childcare was often mentioned by workers during the interviews as one of the reasons behind getting into childcare as a job. These interests were also emphasized in the written descriptions alongside soft skills and specific personality traits such as being patient, responsible, friendly, discrete and dynamic. The attributes emphasized by workers – especially those who were diligent about filling out their profiles and successful in finding work – were similar to findings from previous studies on the importance of communicating trustworthiness through profiles by highlighting different soft skills and conveying a naturalized passion and interest in childcare and children (see Fetterolf, 2022; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Ticona et al., 2018). While trust in such cases is often built on reinforcing a gendered construction of domestic work, it plays an important role in the success of a match. However, beyond a simple question of improving individual visibility for accessing work, trust has already been linked in previous debates to notions of professionalism. In other words, across different occupations, professionalism is linked to grounding notions of trust at the core of the economic transaction (Evetts, 2006).

Workers who were successful in finding jobs – especially in childcare – were also able to showcase previous care work experience on their profile, including jobs outside of platforms. The workers interviewed listed previous experiences and trainings such as first-aid courses and red-cross courses for babysitting. Although there are no obligations to include this information or have any diplomas, workers who managed to find jobs in childcare either had some kind of diploma, previous experience in childcare or both as compared to workers who struggled with care work or who could only find cleaning work. Thus, successful profiles also include unofficial requirements in terms of skills, language proficiency and diplomas (Fetterolf, 2022).

Overall, profiles introduce and shape criteria and selection requirements that had previously remained invisible to households in the conventional domestic economy. Profiles serve to make visible and thereby reproduce a professional identity on marketplace platforms built around specific competences, background and experiences needed for domestic work that is simultaneously informative to platform clients in their decisions of whom to hire. In addition, profiles create differential access to work among workers according to different skill levels as well as migration status, which workers can choose to disclose on their profiles. However, the absence of a declared migration status and a failure to mention language proficiency might already point to one’s migratory background or insecure residency status – or at a minimum, raise questions about them.

As previously argued by Ticona et al. (2018), the importance of maintaining an individualized form of visibility on marketplace platforms reinforces the need for workers to be proficient in skills such as ‘self-branding’ and ‘online impression management practices’, which are related to language and digital skills. Moreover, profiles stir competition among workers while standardizing specific skills and attributes that they are expected to have. This can make finding domestic work

harder for those not yet established in the city, or who are lacking skills, time or the understanding of the work culture on the platform. Therefore, the individual visibility promoted on platforms establishes new selectivity requirements that can act as barriers to entry in the domestic gig economy. In addition, such selectivity requirements run the risk of exacerbating the stratification of work in the domestic economy, as workers who are more skilled, proficient in the language or who fulfil other specific requirements of the platform are able to access care work while others either struggle or are only able to access cleaning work.

Working to be visible

Following tumultuous events, Nadine was not quite ready to pick up her studies after finishing a bachelor's degree in the social sciences. Since she struggled to find work, she joined marketplace platforms, mainly focusing on babysitting and sometimes performing other domestic tasks. The leap to work on platforms made sense, especially since she enjoyed working with children. However, right at the start of our interview, Nadine recalls hard beginnings on platforms. Like other interviewees, searching for and requesting work did not always yield rapid results:

I wanted to also say, there are some platforms . . . I don't like it because I contacted many people. And then there are many people who never answer back. Then they can also decline your application, but for no, without any reason . . . On another platform too, lots of messages. I sent to find two jobs there, I think I sent at least 15 to 20 messages. And then only two replied. A third asked to pay 12 francs an hour. I said I couldn't accept.

Since Nadine has never received direct work requests from the platform clients, she ended up paying a fee to access clients' phone numbers and directly contacts them on one of the platforms. The cost was around 45 francs and allowed Nadine to access phone numbers for 3 months before it needed to be renewed. While the fee was steep for Nadine's budget, it allowed her to find work and a new channel to access the platform clients directly:

I would try to call directly, leave a voice message or WhatsApp or something like that . . . There are still a lot of people who either take a long time to answer, or they don't reply because maybe they don't connect regularly either. When it's like that, I call, I prefer to call. I've noticed that over time, that's what works best . . . And it can also reassure people to talk, I think that's important. And it's also mutual: I can see who I'm dealing with, and they can see who they're dealing with.

The above vignette emphasizes that access to work and earning an income on domestic marketplace platforms is not immediate, as has been reported in other gig economies (Altenried, 2021). As highlighted by Nadine, workers were unclear about how their profiles were shown to the platform clients, how they selected workers and why applications were declined or did not receive any replies. That meant that some of the interviewees found work relatively fast, whereas others struggled longer or even left some of the platforms they signed up for.

Having a profile – even a good one as shared in interviews – was not a guarantee of finding work or being visible to platform clients. Workers did not mention any form of algorithmic management or paying for making their profiles more visible at the top of the platform page. Instead, they actively tried to become visible by spending significant amounts of time filtering job announcements on platforms, with some checking announcements daily and first thing in the morning, and some attempting to go through as many as possible, including old ones. Next, they spent time directly replying to posts and writing messages. The workers I interviewed also responded to announcements that had missing information or minimum details about the job, asking for clarifications and

whether a match could be made. One strategy was also to reply to messages and actively direct the platform client to check the worker's profile to enhance one's visibility. The findings are in line with other studies on care work platforms that highlight the need for workers to be constantly 'connected' and 'responsive' (Fetterolf, 2022; Ticona et al., 2018). While such a strategy is labour-intensive, it was a way for workers to be visible to the platform clients despite any preexisting form of algorithmic prioritization that might be promoted on the platform. However, this strategy necessitates a good command of the language and excellent communication skills. For those comfortable with both, this was an important advantage that could be advanced when attempting to call or write to potential employers.

As highlighted in the vignette, some of the interviewees relied on calling directly to answer job announcements, a way to access platform clients who might not check the platform regularly or answer job requests. However, some marketplace platforms retained control over the communication channels and what information could be shared. For example, some platforms restricted the sharing of phone numbers or names of other social media accounts where workers and platform clients could communicate. Therefore, even if marketplace platforms did not directly intervene in the matchmaking, they still tried to establish rules over what could be exchanged. As Nadine experienced, such restrictions enable platforms to extract fees for accessing phone numbers or keeping access to the platform's messaging service after a free trial period.

Building personal visibility on marketplace platforms is work that requires availability and key communication and customer service skills alongside fast responsiveness. In fact, marketplace platforms are centred around a culture of the service economy geared at responding to the platform clients.

It's good to have reviews, but it's not everything

Alma joined her husband in 2016 to settle in Geneva. Back in Tunisia, she collected various experiences in childcare and working with children with disabilities. For her, marketplace platforms represented an essential door to accessing work and valuing her previous experiences in childcare, which she struggled to get recognized in the conventional labour market. Previous experiences were a big plus in her online profile when sending work requests. Thanks to that, Alma managed to secure different arrangements, some with meagre remuneration while others well paid. However, all felt like a win to Alma, who was trying to add Swiss work experience to her CV and learn about life in Geneva. Having satisfied employers also meant more stars on her profile:

For example, I'm a mom, I'm looking for a nanny, I see, there are several girls and there you see, you see one star, two stars, three stars . . . There are comments, for example. They look because they're looking for someone professional . . . and the cheapest of course! Sometimes, they just look at the price, and then they move on. Some don't, they don't look, they put an announcement

Alma, who always kept her profile active, recalls receiving a message asking for her previous employer's phone number:

She asked me for the phone number of the (previous) family. So I asked them if I could give her the number . . . I told them I found a lady to look after her baby, so she wants your number

the two families got in touch over the phone, and Alma got the job with such a good recommendation from her previous employer that left the new employer in awe. Alma recalls, 'The lady said to me, "Honestly, it's the first time I've heard from someone like that" . . . she was surprised, so I said yes, I've worked with them for three years'.

As the vignette with Alma demonstrates, some workers appreciated the rating systems on the platforms, as having stars can signal trustworthiness, make visible the quality of the service delivery, and give assurances that other platform clients can validate the skills and competencies that workers promote on their profile. However, although the literature on marketplace platforms across different gig economies emphasize the importance of rating systems (Alacovska, 2018; Gandini, 2019; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016), their role in improving the individual visibility of workers, and how they compare to each other (Fetterolf, 2022), my interviews reveal a pervasive ambivalence about the importance of rating systems in accessing work.

According to the workers interviewed, not all previous platform clients left a rating or an evaluation, nor was this mandatory or enforced by the platforms they used. Some workers shared that not all platform clients were comfortable with leaving a public review or a star. Furthermore, according to one worker, having too many reviews could be interpreted as a red flag when it comes to babysitting work and can signal that the worker is unable to reliably stay for long periods with one family. Besides, not having any reviews did not prevent workers from accessing work on the platform. In fact, workers often listed their job experiences on their profile or attached in a CV, and stated that recommendation letters could be sent upon request. Whenever possible, they listed any previous recommendation letters they already had. Like Alma, some workers relied on sharing the phone numbers of their previous employers for good recommendations. In other words, workers did not primarily rely on platform rating systems, but took responsibility for validating and making visible their previous employment experiences and good records, including work in the conventional domestic economy. This also meant that workers invested time to make themselves visible to platform clients and compete for work. Workers overwhelmingly applied directly to job announcements rather than waiting to be contacted by potential platform clients in case they were not visible to them. Being highly active on the platform was a strategy to compensate for the lack of reviews and to improve one's visibility.

As clearly articulated in the vignette, some workers questioned whether rating systems, even with high scores, could affect matches more than requested wages. While workers like Alma believed that they got contacted by employers because of their good ratings on the platform, it was clear from the interviews that workers seldom understood how reviews or ratings affected their visibility on the platforms or the extent of their role in accessing work. In the case of childcare jobs, as detailed in Alma's vignette, some households still saw ratings on the platform as less reliable than speaking directly with previous employers. For the workers I interviewed, having good ratings did not necessarily mean better working conditions or an institutional visibility through formalized employment, but rather a competitive edge over other workers on the platform.

Entry requirements without institutional visibility

For most workers like Camilla, profiles also serve as an interface for advertising one's remuneration. Since most domestic services platforms do not enforce pay scales, workers might be confronted with platform clients who have different expectations and demands regarding what they are willing to pay. Camilla states,

At the beginning I used to put my salary on the platform, 23 francs for example, or 21. But then I found it was better not to put it and just to negotiate at the moment of the interview. Because sometimes for example you say your price, it happened to me two weeks ago that I asked the lady for 23 francs for babysitting. She said, 'Yes Camilla, but another woman asked us for 20'. She asked me to explain why I was asking for 23 instead of 20 . . . So yes, I explained to her, and then she said okay, so sometimes they accept, and others say no.

For Camilla, the remuneration she received depended on different factors beyond work experience and skills. Furthermore, to make her desired pay attractive to potential employers, Camilla tried to minimize certain employment costs such as choosing employers where she would not need to pay for transportation or adapting her pay rate to the socioeconomic situation of the families:

If I see that the family is really able to pay the rate, then I stick to my price. It also depends on the family's circumstances. Some families are very clear in their announcements. They say this is my budget, that's it. And it's because I'm a single mother, or because of that or that. So, I also try to be flexible. But I also think about myself!

On one hand, the individual visibility afforded by profiles on marketplace platforms leads to the overall visibility of workers' skills, competencies and previous experiences. On the other hand, individual visibility does not translate into domestic work being properly valued or a formalized employment relationship. Rather, the visibility of pay scales and the visibility of a large pool of workers on marketplace platforms create an attractive market of domestic workers from which households can pick and choose. As a result, such visibility does not necessarily work in favour of workers who often – with few exceptions in which the work arrangement was formal – lacked the legal status of workers.

First, profiles make visible the different levels of remuneration that workers are asking for. While these prices are freely established by workers, they are set under the pressure of finding a potential employer and getting a match. Since a match means accessing an income upon which they are financially dependent, workers struggling to fulfil specific skill sets or requirements can charge lower rates to become more competitive. However, Camilla refrained from advertising her rate to avoid exclusion from the job competition in a context where wages are not only visible but can vary drastically from one profile to another. As highlighted in the vignette, some of the interviewees had to justify their requested wages to platform clients and demonstrate a degree of flexibility since access to another worker with lower wage demands is often just a click away. And as shown in Camilla's narrative, individual visibility does not coalesce into an institutional visibility for domestic work. Since marketplace platforms do not set up or control remuneration levels – as observed in other studies on care work platforms (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Ticona et al., 2018) – the work arrangement is negotiated on a one-on-one basis with private households as the direct employers. Workers and households try to match according to the budget that households can afford (or are willing to pay), and that workers can accept. This arrangement has led to different platform clients and workers settling for various levels of remuneration, some below and others above the minimum wage in Geneva.

In addition, some interviewees engaged in relational pricing of their services rather than asking for the minimum wage in Geneva. That meant that their requested rate involved assessing the employers' socioeconomic situation and ability to pay, the amount of work involved and interpersonal factors. Some tried to minimize expenses like transport costs and kept the work arrangement informal to further reduce the costs for potential employers.

Second, one of the main elements of selective formalization that was mentioned during interviews was the presence of formal payment channels and the ability to have payslips at the end of the year, which some marketplace platforms offered. However, one worker who used a marketplace that offered such features noted that it lowered her wages even further. The fact that the platform took a cut was seen as a financial loss and therefore having an informal agreement with the household and avoiding the platform's cut seemed more beneficial to her. In addition, while some platforms offered templates or links related to formalizing the employment relationship, most workers struggled to enforce a formalized relationship especially in the absence of any

support. Similarly, workers trying to collect work experience and start working had less power to refuse matches and instead agreed to work arrangement despite low remuneration and/or the absence of formalized arrangements.

Discussion

Professionalization from above of domestic services on marketplace platforms

I argue that visibility on marketplace platforms for domestic work can be seen as a form of professionalization from above. It is a type of professionalization promoted by platforms that place importance on building the professional identity of workers on the platform, client satisfaction and the quality of matches, while remaining ambivalent regarding worker status and earnings. Above all, this platform orientation promotes competition rather than support among workers.

My findings suggest that individual visibility – that is, workers' presence on marketplace platforms and their likelihood of accessing work – is not simply acquired by signing up to the platform. Instead, individual visibility on marketplace platforms requires a professional identity that emphasizes a gendered construction of domestic work and naturalized skills. At the same time through their profiles, the professional identity of workers is marked by the need to showcase attributes and competencies that, while not required, promote workers through their educational background, training or previous domestic work experience. While access to marketplace platforms is not embedded in any form of bureaucracy, access to work on marketplace platforms requires additional labour and specific skills related to digital literacy, marketing, self-branding, communication and customer management (Fetterolf, 2022; Orth, 2024; Ticona et al., 2018).

Individual visibility on marketplace platforms is also part of the selective formalization that shapes the entry requirements for domestic work on marketplace platforms in a top-down manner. From an organizational level, individual visibility reorganizes how workers are distributed and operate within the platform marketplace. First, while marketplace platforms do not intervene in the matching process or directly sanction workers who do not have complete profiles or are not active on the platform, the requirement of individual visibility and building a professional identity acts as a form of standardization of the skills needed to perform domestic work. Second, individual visibility can exclude workers who do not fulfil the professional identity required to access work on marketplace platforms. Therefore, individual visibility serves as a selectivity mechanism whereby successful workers must comply with specific skill and experience requirements, rules of conduct, and modes of offering and presenting their services to the platform clients. Individual visibility ultimately improves the matching process while disproportionately placing that burden on workers. In addition, personal visibility can improve access to workers and to domestic work as a service provided to the platform clients as compared to matchmaking in the conventional domestic economy. Workers who are successful in accessing work are those who demonstrate a large skillset and the ability to adapt to the needs of platform clients, not just in terms of domestic services but also the cultural fit – which can be very specific in care work.

Building on this paper's findings, I argue for viewing visibility on marketplace platforms as a form of professionalization from above since it does not translate into an improvement of the status of workers on platforms. In other words, the findings echo previous research and highlight how, at the everyday level, workers still struggle with factors that have made domestic work invisible and especially access to the legal status of workers and fair wages. In addition, workers are often isolated from each other and not supported in managing the power imbalances with private households.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding visibility is front and centre in discourses about work in the domestic economy, a quintessential example of invisible labour. Therefore, the entry of marketplace platforms into a market already characterized by precarity and informality has begun to receive a lot of scrutiny from scholars (see Fetterolf, 2022; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Ticona et al., 2018; Van Doorn, 2017, 2021). This attention is crucial in a sector in which the standard employment relationship – that platforms have been criticized for eroding (Van Doorn, 2017) – has never been the norm.

Similar to previous findings from other studies on care work platforms (Fetterolf, 2022; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018), interviews with workers show the importance of building individual visibility for accessing work. Individual visibility requires the need to showcase different skills, codes of conduct and customer management on the platform. These requirements are becoming increasingly standard to access work on the platform. Individual visibility becomes a barrier to entry to work on marketplace platforms. On one hand, I argue that visibility on marketplace platforms can be interpreted as a form of professionalization form above as it leads to the institutionalization of standardized skills and practices that workers must demonstrate to access work. While marketplace platforms do not directly intervene in the matchmaking process, they shape access to work. On the other hand, marketplace platforms leave behind the formality of the employment relationship and decent wages, which are externalized and negotiated between workers and the platform clients.

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