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Anything but clean: Working conditions and worker power of domestic cleaners
in the platform economy

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Abstract

Digital labour platforms (DLPs) are known for disrupting incumbent market structures, circumventing existing regulation, applying algorithmic management and creating both opportunities through low-threshold jobs and precarious working conditions. These governance practices are not only limited to DLPs but will have an impact on the future of work in general. The resolution of the EU's platform work directive on October 23, 2024, has brought the issue back onto the agenda of science, politics, and employee representatives. Meanwhile, research exploring job quality and worker power in platform work is still in its early stages. This is particularly true of platform mediated domestic services. Based on eighteen interviews with platform mediated domestic cleaners in Vienna and experts from science, politics and labour activism, this thesis investigates both working conditions of platform mediated domestic cleaners and obstacles and opportunities to worker power in platform work. It identifies four major sets of issues pertaining to platform mediated cleaners, with undeclared work and the platform's design of its digital infrastructure as their main causes: lack of protection and vulnerability to (sexual) violence; lack of protection and vulnerability to overexploitation; workers constantly having to renegotiate roles; and information asymmetry, data protection and arbitrary disciplining measures. The analysis of worker power reveals that the collection and sharing of information on customers and the establishment of communication channels between cleaners would not only enable workers to make initial contact with each other but also counteract information imbalances between clients and workers.

Digitale Arbeitsplattformen (DAPs) sind dafür bekannt, dass sie bestehende Marktstrukturen aufbrechen, geltendes Recht umgehen, algorithmisches Management anwenden und sowohl Chancen durch Jobs mit niedrigen Einstiegshürden als auch prekäre Arbeitsbedingungen schaffen. Diese Governance-Praktiken beschränken sich dabei nicht nur auf DAPs, sondern werden sich auch auf die Zukunft der Arbeit im Allgemeinen auswirken. Die Verabschiedung der EU-Plattformarbeitsrichtlinie am 23. Oktober 2024 hat das Thema erneut auf die Agenda von Wissenschaft, Politik und Arbeitnehmer*innenvertretung gebracht. Die Forschung zur Jobqualität und Arbeiter*innenmacht in der Plattformarbeit befindet sich jedoch noch in einem frühen Stadium. Dies gilt insbesondere für plattformvermittelte Haushaltsdienstleistungen. Auf der Grundlage von achtzehn Interviews mit plattformvermittelten Reinigungskräften in Wien und Expert*innen aus Wissenschaft, Politik und Arbeitnehmer*innenvertretung untersucht diese Arbeit sowohl die Arbeitsbedingungen von plattformvermittelten Reinigungskräften als auch Hindernisse und Chancen für Arbeiter*innenmacht in der Plattformarbeit. Sie identifiziert vier Hauptprobleme im Zusammenhang mit über Plattformen vermittelten Reinigungskräften,

deren Hauptursachen Schwarzarbeit und die Gestaltung der digitalen Infrastruktur der Plattform sind: mangelnder Schutz und Vulnerabilität für (sexuelle) Gewalt; mangelnder Schutz und Vulnerabilität für Ausbeutung; die ständige Neuverhandlung von Rollen; sowie Informationsasymmetrie, Datenschutz und willkürliche Disziplinarmaßnahmen. Die Analyse der Arbeiter*innenmacht zeigt, dass die Sammlung und Weitergabe von Informationen über Kund*innen sowie die Einrichtung von Kommunikationskanälen zwischen Reinigungskräften den Arbeiter*innen nicht nur ermöglichen würde, ersten Kontakt miteinander aufzunehmen. Auch würde es dem Informationsungleichgewicht zwischen Kund*innen und Arbeiter*innen entgegenwirken.

Keywords: Platform work, digital labour platforms, political economy, labour sociology, working conditions, care fix, worker power

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List of Abbreviations

CEPS	Centre for European Policy Studies
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
DLP	Digital labour platform
EC	European Commission
EPP	European People's Party
ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation
ETUI	European Trade Union Institute
EU	European Union
EU27	European Union member states
EUPWD	EU's directive on improving working conditions in platform work
ICT	Information and communication technology
IG24	Interest group of 24-hour caregivers
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPO	Initial public offering
JRC	Joint Research Centre
PRA	Power resource approach
QCA	Qualitative content analysis
ROI	Returns on investment
S&D	Socialists and Democrats
UK	United Kingdom
WEP	Work, employment and worker power
WES	Work, employment and social relations
VC	Venture capital

1 Introduction

Digital platform businesses such as Google, Facebook and Amazon are among the largest companies in the world (Fortune, 2025). Digital platforms provide and manage a digital infrastructure where suppliers and consumers of products and services interact (Evans, 2011). Digital labour platforms (DLPs) specialize in the digital intermediation of services (European Commission [EC], 2021). In the EU alone, there are now more than 500 DLPs offering a variety of services, including delivery, translation, care, passenger transport and cleaning (EC, 2021). These platforms generated revenues of €14 billion and employ over 28 million people in 2020, with this figure estimated to reach 43 million by the end of this year (EC, 2021). The platformisation of the economy describes a trend that refers not only to the growth of DLPs but also to the underlying management and governance practices that will have an impact on the future of work in general (Davis, 2016; van Doorn & Vijay, 2024). The corresponding effects on working conditions, the associated techniques of power, and the new obstacles and opportunities for worker power hence gain a relevance that extends beyond the realm of platform work.

DLPs are known for disrupting incumbent market structures, circumventing existing regulation, applying algorithmic management and creating both opportunities through low-threshold jobs as well as precarious working conditions – often accompanied by exploitation, lack of social protection and low levels of organised labour (Fairwork, 2024; Hauben et al., 2020; Killhoffer et al., 2020). Regulation of DLPs gained new momentum with the resolution of the EU’s directive on improving working conditions in platform work (EUPWD) on October 23, 2024 (Rainone & Aloisi, 2024). The EU’s decision has drawn renewed attention to the sector’s notoriously bad working conditions and put it on the agenda of policymakers, scientists, and political lobby groups, including business associations and trade unions. As member states have two years to implement the directive, national bodies – including social partners – are currently working actively on its implementation in their respective countries.

Platform workers are often exposed to weak social protection resulting from non-standard forms of employment (including bogus self-employment and undeclared work), exploitative management practices, digital surveillance and disciplining measures, and a lack of collective rights combined with impediments to worker organisation (EC, 2021; Killhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna et al., 2022). With heterogeneity both in terms of the nature of work and the socio-economic profile of the workers, challenges vary and partly coincide with those of atypical forms of employment and general trends in the labour market. Thus, some scholars regard the

emergence of DLPs as part of a larger trend towards increasing precarity in the labour market – as an “algorithmic intensification of established modes of exploitation and control” (van Doorn 2017, p. 900; see also Crouch, 2019; Schor et al., 2020).

Although the emergence and expansion of new forms of platform work led to an increase in research interest in recent years, research exploring job quality of platform work “remains in its infancy” (Myhill et al., 2021). This is particularly true of platform mediated domestic services, which receive comparatively little attention in both politics and academia and are still predominantly performed by migrant women, often in undeclared working relationships (Altenried et al., 2021; Bor, 2021; Dowling, 2022; Keller, 2022; Strüver & Lentz, 2024; Wiesböck et al., 2023). At the same time, existing research lacks investigations into constraints and opportunities for platform workers to improve their conditions, i.e. worker agency and worker power (Piasna et al., 2022; Vandaele et al., 2024).

This research contributes to closing these gaps by investigating both working conditions of platform mediated domestic cleaners in Vienna and obstacles and opportunities to worker power in platform work. It proceeds in three steps to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the material conditions for the economic viability of digital labour platforms in general and platforms for care work in particular? (Context analysis)
2. How do workers experience their work and why? What challenges do they face and why? How do they deal with these challenges? (Analysis of working conditions and experiences)
3. What are obstacles and opportunities for worker power and why? (Analysis of worker power)

I address these questions from an interdisciplinary perspective that combines theoretical insights from political economy, labour sociology, feminist and critical race theory. The analysis is based on an extensive literature review and eighteen interviews in total – seven interviews with domestic cleaners working in Vienna via the platform [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) and eleven interviews with experts from science, politics and labour activism. In line with transdisciplinary research, a main motivation of this project is to translate the findings into useful resources to support workers coping with or fighting against bad working conditions by publishing some of the results in low-threshold formats, including blog articles and information brochures.

I find that the economic viability of DLPs hinges on the accessibility of both substantial amounts of capital with high affinity towards risk for a long period and a reserve army of workers “willing” to work under bad conditions. This includes low protection and low income

security as well as high work-related risks to physical and mental health, among others. This observation establishes a structural link between broader developments driving the commodification of labour on the one hand, and the emergence and continuing operation of DLPs on the other.

Concerning working conditions and experiences of platform mediated cleaners, I identify four major sets of issues pertaining to platform mediated cleaners, with undeclared work and the platform's design of its digital infrastructure as the main causes: lack of protection and vulnerability of workers to (sexual) violence, which is the most pressing issue; lack of protection and vulnerability to overexploitation; a constant pressure for workers to renegotiate roles; and information asymmetry, data protection and arbitrary disciplining measures through unfair customer ratings. Workers cope with these risks in a number of ways. However, precarious living conditions combined with the platform's design create an extremely uneven playing field, with potential clients in a far more powerful position than workers, such that coping mechanisms cannot effectively address these risks.

The analysis of worker power reveals that the collection and sharing of information on customers and the establishment of communication channels between cleaners would not only enable workers to make initial contact with each other but also counteract the information imbalance between clients and workers described above. Points of entry for such and other organisational efforts could be possibly existing communities in the workforce built around cultural commonalities – such communities have proven and continue to be important points of entry for worker organisation in comparable sectors as well.

The following sections introduces the concepts and insights that form the theoretical framework for my analysis. I introduce the concepts of job quality, precarity, racial and patriarchal capitalism as well as the power resource approach as analytical tools for interpreting my data. I also introduce the Work, Employment and Worker Power (WEP) model as a framework to examine both working conditions and worker power. In section 3, I describe the processes of data selection, collection and analysis in more detail. Section 4 introduces and summarises the economic, social and governance mechanisms underpinning the business operation of DLPs. I end this section with the context analysis, followed by the analysis of working conditions and experiences as well as worker power in section 5. Section 6 concludes.

2 Theoretical and conceptual foundations

The following section introduces the concepts of job quality as well as worker agency and worker power, and provides a framework to analyse these dimensions empirically. To this end, I draw on theoretical and conceptual work from political economy, sociology of labour, feminist theory, and critical race theory. In a first step, I discuss the concept of job quality and present the connection between processes of precarisation, capitalist accumulation, racialisation and feminisation. Drawing on the Power Resource Approach (PRA), I then introduce the concepts of worker agency and worker power. Finally, I present my framework for analysing working conditions, work experiences, and worker power, as well as a schematic representation of my entire research project.

2.1 Job quality, precarisation and capitalist accumulation

Corresponding to the differentiation in work experience and working conditions, research on job quality differentiates between an objective and a subjective dimension, which complement each other (Myhill et al., 2021). The objective dimension encompasses indicators such as earnings, protection, working times, etc., while the subjective dimension focuses on the lived experiences of the worker. Both dimensions present their own challenges for measuring. Although it makes sense to bear this theoretical distinction in mind, the “objective” criteria are not entirely detached from workers’ experience and always encompass a subjective dimension as well. “Objective” is not meant to designate an objective truth, but rather a basis for comparing and evaluating positions of different workers. The advantage of including both dimensions in research on job quality is that subjective experiences of work often differ from inferences researchers might draw from objective criteria. Individual and contextual factors such as worker characteristics, living conditions and preferences affect experiences and are often overlooked when focussing solely on objective criteria. At the same time, omitting objective criteria would make the research susceptible to (ideological) bias and foreclose critical interpretations that relate subjective experiences and their positionalities to the broader context. For example, job satisfaction in the same job will differ substantially between different individuals depending on their previous experiences and current position in the labour market.

Connected to the concept of job quality is that of *precarisation*. While precarisation can be understood in a very narrow sense as the decline of the standard employment relation and with it an increase in insecurity, risks and deprivation stemming from non-standard forms of employment (Armano et al., 2022), such a conceptualisation overlooks the broader context in

which the wage-labour relationship and the worker are located, whether they are in standard employment or not. Following Butler (2009, p. ii), I will therefore apply a broader conception of precarity designating

... that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection.

This understanding of precarisation includes the wage-labour relationship (as the primary source of protection in capitalism) but also draws attention to conditions that extend beyond it. In my understanding, then, precarity is the result of a continued and systematic process, which produces and distributes protection and vulnerability within society, creating positions that differ in their exposedness to harm.

Capitalist production uses precarised populations as capital accumulation – the use of capital to acquire more capital and the core mechanism behind capitalist production – depends on labour power. Since the wage-labour relationship is the form which labour takes in capitalism, the accumulation of capital is dependent on the “voluntariness” of the workers. The process that guarantees this “voluntary” provision of labour is as old as capitalism itself and is laid out by Marx in the concept of the “double free” worker: the deprivation of the means of subsistence (i.e. precarisation) or the threat of this loss go hand in hand with the offer of wage labour as the means to guarantee the individual’s livelihood (Federici, 2004; Marx, 2021). Only as long as there is an oversupply of precarious labour – the reserve army – is there a certain guarantee for the possibility of capital accumulation. The constant and real threat of the withdrawal of the means of subsistence and the competition resulting from the oversupply of labour are the sticks, the living wage is the carrot of a comprehensive disciplining of the population to guarantee the accumulation of capital.

The positions produced through precarisation and the populations assigned to them are created along differentiations based on race, class, gender and ability, among others – categories that intersect and create positions differing in their degree of vulnerability as well as the kinds of violence they are exposed to (Crenshaw, 1989). The concept of *racial capitalism* emphasises the connection between capitalist accumulation and the cultural, social and political inscription of disposability into particular bodies based on the constructed category of race: “the ‘racial’ shapes and is shaped by multiple techniques of embodied othering which, together, hierarchically organise labour-power and unevenly distribute precarity, vulnerability, resources and rights throughout populations” (Gebrial, 2024, p. 1174; see also Birke, 2022). A system is

racial, therefore, insofar as it defines groups of people “as culturally, geographically and biologically distinct, in order to make them more vulnerable to expropriation, exploitation and uneven development” (Bradley & Nronha, 2022, p. 17). The notion of *capitalist patriarchy* draws attention to the practices of othering that create an exploitable work force based on the degradation of bodies constructed as female or queer, and through linking these bodies to the provision of care services in particular (Federici, 2004). When racialisation describes this construction process of the category of race, feminisation means

... to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex (Haraway, 2006, p. 133).

This view on the structures behind precarisation and capitalist accumulation is not intended to endorse a quasi-deterministic view on these interrelations. Quite to the contrary, I want to pay particular attention to worker’s agency and the ways in which workers deal with the troubles they face. This perspective rather offers a framework to capture the correlations that exist between, for example, gender and the probability of being exposed to sexual violence, or race and the probability of being poor. And it provides a framework to capture the ways in which corporations provide new opportunities to precarised populations while at the same time generating revenues based on their intensified exploitation – a practice Gebrial (2024) calls “predatory inclusion”. Predatory inclusion relies on the existence of a surplus population to whom it can offer a certain degree of security and autonomy. It also implies, however, that while some may manage to accumulate human capital and move on, the majority are kept in a state of extreme insecurity, powerlessness and vulnerability that allows companies to continue their practice of intensified exploitation.

In summary, it can be said that processes of precarisation accompany capitalist accumulation and are structured along dimensions such as race and gender. Precarised populations – who are placed in positions of increased vulnerability – can be integrated into accumulation processes as extremely dependent workers. Predatory inclusion refers here to a practice of companies generating profits based on the overexploitation of precarised groups, with little opportunity for workers to improve their conditions resulting from these jobs.

2.2 Worker agency and worker power

Worker agency is exercised via two channels: At an individual level, workers find ways to cope and deal with challenges they are faced with or resist practices of oppression and subordination

(Heiland & Schaupp, 2023). At a collective level, worker agency is about organising and asserting their interests together, which I call *worker power* (Schmalz et al., 2018). With platform mediated cleaners in Vienna having a very low or, in the conventional sense, no degree of organisation (Wiesböck et al., 2023), my research focuses on coping practices and the identification of obstacles to and opportunities for worker power.

The *power resource approach* (PRA) provides a systematic account for the analysis of worker power. It is based on a Weberian understanding of power as the ability to assert one's interest in the face of opposition. It holds that workers "can successfully defend [their] interests by collective mobilisation of power resources in the structurally asymmetric and antagonistic relationship between capital and labour" (Schmalz et al., 2018, p. 115). As such, it takes structural conditions as a given and aims to "analyse the spaces of action of trade unions and [workers] under given circumstances" (Schmalz et al., 2018, p. 116). This focus on power in the Weberian sense comes with certain restraints. A research endeavour is necessarily limited if it simply takes categories such as "worker" or "management" as given, without asking how these categories were or could be fabricated. In other words: a worker is more than, and sometimes something different from, a mere position in the production process, but a culturally and politically laden identity. Such remarks notwithstanding, the PRA provides a practical and highly useful "research heuristic" (Schmalz et al., 2018, p. 113) for analysing worker power.

The PRA differentiates between four power resources that (organised) labour can use to forward its interest: structural, associational, institutional and societal power (Schmalz et al., 2018). These four resources must be understood as analytical categories with complex interrelations that cannot always be clearly separated in empirical research. *Structural power* denotes the power that is given to workers qua their position as essential components in the production process (Anner, 2015; Merk, 2009). Capitalist accumulation depends on the provision of labour power and, therefore, workers have the power to disrupt this process by refraining from providing it. Workers can use their structural power either within contractual relationships, for example by going on strike (*workplace bargaining power*), or they can exercise this power by exiting a contractual relationship, mostly because of the prospect of having better job opportunities or better living conditions outside the job (*marketplace bargaining power*).

Organisational or associational power emerges when workers unite and join forces (Brinkmann & Nachtwey, 2010). Workers' associations include bottom-up initiatives, works councils, trade unions, or political parties. Factors that increase associational power are member numbers, infrastructural resources, organisational efficiency, member participation and internal cohesion (Schmalz et al., 2018). From a Foucauldian viewpoint that regards power as productive

(Foucault, 1995), interpreting the world in terms of one's subordination in the wage labour relation and forming an identity based on this interpretation can be seen as crucial preconditions for workers to unite and engage in associations.

Institutional power stems from the values, norms and rights that have been achieved through labour struggles in the broadest sense and that workers can refer to in order to advance their interests (Brookes, 2017). This includes policies and laws, treaties, recommendations and guidelines, corporate social responsibility (CSR), or values that prevail in society. Institutional power is a secondary form of power in two senses: it depends on certain institutions having already been established, and it requires actors who enforce an accusation on the basis of these institutions. This includes national and international courts, companies' internal procedures and the media.

Finally, *societal power* denotes resources that labour can mobilise within civil society. Building coalitions with other civil society organisations (*coalitional power*) is one source of societal power. Another strategy is to influence public debates through organised labour "providing patterns for interpreting or framing burning issues" (Schmalz et al., 2018, p. 123). This *discursive power* builds on the ability to activate the media and public based on prevailing moral values, using the scandalisation of injustices to create public pressure.

To sum up, we can distinguish two modes of worker agency – either by coping and resisting practices on an individual level, or through collective action in the form of worker power. Both are important ways through which workers improve their working conditions. Building on the PRA, we can distinguish four dimensions of worker power: structural, associational, institutional and societal power resources. In my analysis, I take both individual coping strategies as well as worker power with its four dimensions into account.

2.3 Introducing the Work, Employment and Worker Power framework

Assembling the concepts of job quality and worker power, this sub-section introduces the main objects of my research and a comprehensive framework to analyse these dimensions. Building on previous research, I will present a multi-dimensional framework to analyse both working conditions and power resources of workers.

As outlined above, job quality is a multidimensional topic encompassing a range of characteristics and covering both subjective experiences and "objective" criteria. The subjective dimension can be best integrated in the research agenda through an interview setting that allows for workers to elaborate on their own experiences. The objective dimension should be based on

a comprehensive framework, however, that covers a wide range of indicators (some of which are also based on subjective experience and evaluation). In the scientific literature, there exists a multitude of frameworks to analyse job quality (Myhill et al., 2021). Popular models include the ILO's Decent Work Agenda (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017), the Fair Work Framework (Fair Work Convention, 2016; Fairwork, 2024), the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) Job Quality Index (ETUI, 2018) and the (adjusted) Work, Employment and Social Relations (WES) model (Kilhoffer et al., 2020). All these frameworks encompass indices such as earnings, employment relation, working times, protection, training and some measure for worker's voice.

Of these frameworks, the adjusted WES model used by Kilhoffer et al. (2020) in their analysis of working conditions of platform workers within the EU is the most comprehensive one as it covers four dimensions: "work", "employment", "social relations" and "other indicators". The work dimension is intended to cover "job content, working conditions and work organisation, which impact physical and psychological risks for the platform worker" (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 17). This includes worker autonomy, work intensity, emotional demands and physical environment, among others. The employment dimension is meant to capture "the formal context in which a platform worker performs tasks, such as their employment status, the nature and content of their contract with the platform, the level of social protection, and the composition of their earnings" (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 17). The social relations dimension measures the way workers are socially integrated in their work, including interactions with colleagues and the management, as well as workers' representation. Finally, the "other indicators" dimension covers the issues of undeclared work, cross-border work and data protection. All dimensions and their indicators have implications for job quality and the risks the worker is exposed to. They are sometimes overlapping and not as clearly separable in practice as in theory and meant to provide a comprehensive and detailed picture of overall working conditions.

Due to its comprehensiveness, I use the adjusted WES model as a framework for analysing working conditions. However, as my research also asks about constraints to and opportunities for worker power, I adjusted it further by substituting the social relations dimension with a worker power dimension. Indicators like harmful behaviour by clients or colleagues are now covered by the work dimension. This new model has the advantage that it can be used to analyse both working conditions and power resources of workers. Unlike the adjusted WES model, it not only focuses on worker representation in the workplace but broadens the scope to include other indicators that are relevant to worker power. The adapted Work, Employment and Worker Power (WEP) model is summarised in table 1.

Work dimension	Employment dimension	Worker Power dimension	Other indicators
Autonomy in the allocation of tasks	Employment status	Structural power	Undeclared work
Autonomy in work organisation	Determination of the employer	Associational power	Cross-border work
Surveillance and disciplination	Contracts	Institutional power	Data protection
Task complexity	Social protection	Societal power	
Work intensity and speed pressure	Earnings		
Emotional demands	Working time		
Physical environment	Career opportunities		
Harmful behaviour	Training and skills		
Coping strategies			

Table 1: Work, Employment, Worker Power (WEP) model

Source: Own elaborations based on Kilhoffer et al. (2020)

The theoretical reflections laid out in this section, then, provide me with the conceptual frameworks to pursue the aims of my research to (1) provide insights into working conditions, experiences and challenges, and the way workers deal with them; (2) identify obstacles and opportunities for worker power; and (3) position my findings in a broader context and relate them back to the structural conditions they are embedded in and are part of. The resulting research agenda is summarised in table 2.

In a first step, I investigate the structural conditions that led to the emergence of DLPs in general, and DLPs for care services more specifically. I use concepts from critical political economy, feminist and critical race theory to explain how they operate, how they generate and capture value, and what are the conditions for the economic viability of their business model. In a second step, I use the work and employment dimensions of the WEP model to answer my research questions concerning working experiences, working conditions, challenges at work and coping mechanisms by workers. The framework provides a tool to systematically analyse the data provided by workers and identify the most important findings. The third step of my analysis concerns the identification of constraints to and opportunities for worker power. Here, I compare the findings from different sectors (food delivery, 24-hour care, domestic cleaning) with regard to their power resources, taking all four dimensions of workers power (structural, association, institutional, societal) into account.

Research Area	Research steps	Research questions	Theoretical/ conceptual background	Methods / Data		
				Desk research	Worker interviews	Expert interviews
Context	Analysis of structural conditions	1. What are the material conditions for the economic viability of digital labour platforms in general and platforms for care work in particular?	Political economy, feminist and critical race theory	x		x
Working conditions and experience	Analysis of work dimension and employment dimension	2. How do workers experience their work and why?	Sociology of labour, WEP model, feminist and critical race theory	x	x	
		3. What challenges do they face and why?		x	x	
		4. How do they deal with these challenges?		x	x	
Worker power	Analysis of worker power dimension	5. What are obstacles and opportunities for worker power, and why?	PRA, WEP model	x	x	x

Table 2: Research agenda

3 Methods and data

Bearing the three research areas (context, working conditions and experience, worker power) and the corresponding research questions in mind, this section outlines my strategy for selecting and collecting data, the method I use for data analysis as well as the limitations of the results. The work is based on an understanding of causality that can be classified as critical realism (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020; Collier, 1994). Critical realism understands the emergence of observable phenomena as the result of the interaction of various conditions that are located “below the surface” of what can be directly observed. Explanations therefore primarily aim to uncover the conditions whose often complex interaction has led to the observed phenomenon (*retroduction*) (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017).

For this research project, I use three qualitative methods for collecting data: desk research, worker interviews and expert interviews. Desk research is crucial to get an overview on conceptual work and methodological approaches regarding platform labour as well as previous findings relating to my research questions. Since there is already a vast amount of research on platform work and some research on care platforms in particular, these findings inform all three steps of my analysis. Worker interviews are important due to limited previous research in the field (Wiesböck et al., 2023), to receive an up-to-date picture of work realities on DLPs for domestic services and to contribute empirical findings to research on this sector. As there is no organised labour in platform mediated domestic cleaning, I broaden the scope of my research question concerning worker power to include platform work in general, particularly platform-based food delivery services as this industry is the best organised among DLPs. Since I am not only considering structural and associational but also institutional and societal power resources, researchers, policy makers and activists outside the union movement are also relevant interview partners.

Thus, I end up with the three-step analysis consisting of, first, desk research and expert interviews with researchers, trade unionists, policy makers and activists to analyse structural conditions that led to the emergence of DLPs and their relevance for the EU and Austria. Second, I conducted semi-structured interviews with platform mediated domestic cleaners to analyse working experience and working conditions. Desk research complemented this step in two ways: first, by providing initial insights into the field and refine specific directions in where to focus my research. Second, by enabling me to compare my results with previous ones, identify gaps, and provide evidence for or against previous hypotheses. For the third step – the analysis of worker power – I used data from all three sources to get an overall picture about

worker power in the platform economy and compare it with the specific conditions of platform mediated domestic cleaners.

3.1 Selecting and collecting the data: Choosing interview partners for semi-structured interviews

To access the field of platform mediated domestic cleaners, I used a similar strategy to Wiesböck et. al (2023, 2024). Thus, I contacted workers via [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) and asked if they were willing to participate as interview partners in my research project. Interviews were about one hour, and I offered a compensation of €25. All interviews were anonymised in order to protect the worker's identity.

I used purposive sampling and snowball sampling as sampling strategies to select interview partners. Purposive sampling allows for a high information content to be achieved in the sample despite limited resources, whereby a large variance in relevant parameters should be aimed for (Robinson, 2014). Thus, such samples are not representative and are susceptible to bias. Parameters for purposive sampling were based on previous findings and included differences in experience with the platform, age, country of origin and care responsibilities. Due to the difficulty in accessing the field – one interviewee would tell me that she was hesitant to consent to the interview at first because the request was somewhat retraumatising in that it brought back bad work experiences – I chose snowball sampling as a second strategy (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021). This strategy was successful insofar as I gained access to a Sri Lankan migrant community in Vienna, many of which work via [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at). However, due to similarities in their socio-economic position, the additional information gained with each interview was limited, and after interviews with four workers from this community, I resorted to purposive sampling again.

For the third research step concerning the question on constraints and opportunities for worker power in the platform economy, I conducted expert interviews with trade unionists and labour activists in platform mediated food delivery and 24-hour care, policy makers deeply involved in the EUPWD legislative process and researchers from the trade union-affiliated research institute ETUI. I selected these experts based on the following considerations: First, the platform mediated food delivery sector is the largest sector in platform labour in the EU, and it is also the one with the highest degree of organised labour. Thus, most trade unionists working on the topic of platform work come from this sector, and they have a lot of valuable insights into the specific challenges and opportunities that platform workers face. However, as already

pointed out, the platform workforce is characterised by strong heterogeneity, including along different professions.

Since there is no labour organisation in platform mediated domestic work, I was looking for interest groups of workers with similar working conditions. Although 24-hour caregivers do not work via digital platforms, there are significant similarities to domestic cleaners in terms of working conditions. This made the interest group of 24-hour caregivers, IG24, a relevant expert to learn about challenges and opportunities to improve the worker power of cleaners. These similarities include, among others, that both workforces are predominantly composed of migrant women (whereas in food delivery the majority are men); both work in isolation in private households performing care work including intimate relationships with clients; working conditions are characterised by low pay, lack of protection, vulnerability to (sexual) violence, maltreatment and overexploitation, renegotiating roles as well as information asymmetries and surveillance; both are faced with a triangular relationship with intermediaries (intermediating agencies in the case of caregivers, DLPs in the case of cleaners) and clients characterized by strong dependence on both; and workers facing labour market discrimination, lack of alternative jobs, and precarious living conditions. Relevant differences include the employment status, the socioeconomic position of the workers and the way work is organised. Caregivers are self-employed, generally older than cleaners, live abroad and only commute to Austria for work, where they live with the clients for a certain period.

Third, I considered policy makers within the EU relevant interview partners since they possess insights into the relations of forces between DLPs and organised labour, and into the channels that organised labour possesses to influence policy making on platform work. Both are important to evaluate institutional power resources of platform workers.

I used semi-structured interviews for both expert and worker interviews as well as one focus group with two workers (Helfferich, 2019; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021). Corresponding to the two different types of interviews, I used two different approaches. For expert interviews, I adjusted the interview guideline according to the respective expertise of my interview partner. In general, I conducted the expert interviews in a narrative style with guiding questions structured around certain topics. For worker interviews, I used a standardised interview guideline that combined narrative questions with more specific ones. Questions were derived from theory – the WEP model, in particular – and compared to the interview guideline used by Fairwork (2024) to gain inspiration for further questions and to fill in any gaps. The rationale was to include narrative parts, where workers would elaborate on their subjective experiences and set their own priorities, while at the same time ensuring comprehensiveness and

comparability between workers with respect to working conditions. The guideline thus primarily served as a memory aid to ensure all topics of interest were covered. Guiding questions were repeatedly modified and adapted during the process, but the thematic blocks remained the same.

The focus group was structured in a similar way and contained questions aiming at opening space for each individual worker to elaborate on their experiences as well as problem-centred parts. I conducted the focus group with two workers who were close friends. The focus group had two advantages compared to the interviews. Firstly, the two participants were able to discuss the topics raised with each other, which helped them to remember and provided deeper insights. Secondly, it also reduced the language barrier, as one of the participants did not speak English as well as the other. This meant that they could also communicate in their native language and then translate what had been said. In an interview setting, some of the content that could be communicated in the focus group would therefore have been lost.

3.2 Analysing the data: Qualitative content analysis

For the data analysis, I used the method of qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Kuckartz, 2019). QCA allows for the controlled, rule-based, and traceable evaluation of texts. Based on theoretical considerations, code development was strongly concept-driven (“deductive”) but also included data-driven (“inductive”) codes.

In a first step, I coded the transcripts using the categories and codes I had derived from the theory and literature. The codes from the WEP model were central here, but I also used other codes relating to the socioeconomic position of workers, job satisfaction, labour market discrimination, etc. At the same time, I generated new codes for text passages that could not be captured in the existing coding system. In a second step, I went through the generated codes and the corresponding text passages and performed another run of the data with the new coding system. The third step in the content-structuring analysis of the material was to summarise the main findings in the individual codes and evaluate them in a matrix. For each code, the key findings were summarised, the frequency of mention was recorded, relevant quotations were noted, and a weighting was carried out based on relevance, in particular on the frequency of mention. In a fourth step, types were formed regarding socioeconomic status and length and depth of experience with the platform. These were then related to the findings. The findings generated from the interviews were also compared to previous findings from the literature.

3.3 Reflections on positionality and limitations

Four major limitations result from the research setting presented in this thesis. The first one concerns the limited representativeness and generalisability of the results due to the sample's limited size and due to the sampling method, which is not randomised. As pointed out above, both purposive and snowball sampling are susceptible to bias due to theoretical considerations, previous research results, and personal factors. Thus, the results concerning working conditions of workers on *haushaltshilfe24.at* cannot be considered representative for all workers on this platform, let alone for workers in platform mediated domestic services in general. Nonetheless, some of the problems identified in this research result from structures that are likely to result in similar problems for other platform mediated domestic workers as well. By comparing with previous research findings and considering structural conditions (e.g., political and legal frameworks and the platform's digital infrastructure), this limitation could be somewhat counteracted. Nevertheless, the results should be seen as a starting point for further research in a field that has been understudied to date.

With sexual violence being a major issue in the cleaners' work experiences, talking about such issues in an interview setting was a major challenge. For reasons of research ethics, it was clear to me that an interview setting in which the interviewees feel comfortable had the highest priority. In my communication, I therefore always emphasised that the interviewees could refuse to answer questions or end the interview at any time without giving reasons or suffering any disadvantages as a result. When approaching possible interviewees, I also included the option of having the interview at a public space and without audio recording. Being perceived as a white male researcher might have led some workers to a different presentation of their experience or restraint in sharing certain experiences, particularly regarding experiences of sexual violence.

A third and related limitation results from difficulties in communication due to language barriers. All interviews were conducted in a language that was not the mother tongue of at least one of the participants. Thus, participants were sometimes struggling to express themselves correctly, and sometimes misunderstandings occurred.

A last challenge resulted from integrating the research question on worker power into the research project, due to the lack of organised labour in platform mediated domestic work. Thus, the scope of the results concerning worker power is broader but also less clearly demarcated. One difficulty was integrating the different perspectives from different sectors (cleaning, delivery services, 24-hour care) and institutional areas (trade unions, politics) while always

keeping in mind the areas for which the data is valid and where comparability can be found. The fast changing circumstances in platform labour further limit the temporal validity of the results.

4 Digital labour platforms: The future of work?

4.1 Digital platforms

Digital or online platforms are digital applications that allow interactions between users for the purpose of exchanging information, goods or services (Sarter, 2024, p. 7). For a platform to exist, there need to be at least two distinct sets of users (“sides”, for example, buyers and sellers or content producers and consumers) who interact in at least one direction. Well-known examples include Amazon, Airbnb, Google, or Uber.

4.1.1 How do digital platforms create value?

Digital platforms create value – understood here simply in terms of economic benefit – above all by reducing the transaction costs for searching, interactions between their users, and innovations (Evans, 2011). This can include so-called value co-creation, where customers participate in the production of a good or service, for example through contributions or ratings. Different kinds of platforms achieve this lowering of transaction costs through different mechanisms. For example, digital marketplaces like Amazon decrease the costs for searching for goods from the consumers’ perspective while at the same time allowing access to a huge potential customer base for retailers. Software platforms (like Linux, Microsoft, or Apple) provide an infrastructure that app developers can build upon and, similarly, provide access to a large pool of potential customers. Software platforms also facilitate innovation by enabling software developers to invent complementary products that build on the digital infrastructure. Advertising-supported media (like magazines, free television, Instagram, or Facebook) build audiences that are potential customers to advertising businesses. Transaction platforms (like Visa or Mastercard) facilitate payments. And labour platforms – where service providers and customers can find each other – can reduce searching costs, allow the specification of workers for certain steps in the production process and the location- and time-specific, flexible deployment of workers as well as reduce information asymmetries (e.g. through user ratings) (Evans, 2011; Nachtwey & Staab, 2020).

What all platforms have in common is that they take advantage of “network effects”, i.e. “the more numerous the users who use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else” (Srnicek, 2017, p. 30). Network effects can either be direct (the value of a platform increases because of the number of users) or indirect (the value increases because more complementary products are available on the platform).

As a platform becomes more valuable to an increasing number of users, network effects can lead to rapid, sometimes exponential growth. This increase in the value of a platform when more people use it coincides with economies of scale and scope. There are significant fixed costs of establishing a platform (e.g. developing the software) but decreasing costs for each additional individual that joins the platform (economies of scale). Similarly, there are often cost advantages in producing different kinds of goods (or providing different kinds of services) on the same platform (economies of scope): “These economies of scope can be achieved by sharing and merging consumer data and sharing branding, supplier relationship, or technical expertise” (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021, p. 12).

Ceteris paribus, network effects (and economies of scale and scope) lead platforms to compete for a market (instead of competing in a market). Platform companies would therefore try to increase their customer base until all potential customers use the same platform and outcompete other businesses to dominate the market (winner-takes-all market) (Nachtwey & Staab, 2020). If network effects and economies of scale and scope are indeed the relevant mechanisms that determine the size of a platform, there will be a tendency towards a monopolistic or oligopolistic market structure (EC, 2021). However, there can also be countervailing forces: on the one hand, “[a]t a given size expanding the number of customers on the platform can result in congestion that increases search and transaction costs” (Evans, 2011, p. 16). On the other, platforms can differentiate themselves from each other through different levels of quality (vertical differentiation), or different features that appeal to different customer groups (horizontal differentiation) (Evans, 2011).

Cause	Effect on size / concentration
Network effects	+
Economies of scale and scope	+
Congestion	-
Platform differentiation	-

Table 3: Economic determinants of industry structure

Source: Own elaboration based on Evans (2011)

Thus, digital platforms can be in a position of market makers rather than of competitors in a market (Evans, 2011). By virtue of their position, they have structural power over the users of their platform and their interactions – they provide the infrastructure, set the rules and norms that govern interactions and therefore effectively shape what actions are possible or convenient for users. This power is somewhat contained as long as there is competition between platforms

and users can easily switch from one to another. However, as described above, platforms often compete for a dominant position which makes it hard for users to switch to an alternative platform because benefits accrue to users precisely because the platform is the largest one. Once in this position, platforms can set rules in a way that is not necessarily beneficial to users, which also poses problems from a competition perspective (EC, 2021).

4.1.2 How do digital platform businesses capture value?

For analytical purposes, it can make sense to differentiate between the platform as a technology (a software enabling the provision of a service), as an organisation (that establishes rules that govern the interactions on the platform in a certain way), and as a business model (a specific organisation with a purpose of generating profits) (Evans, 2011). This distinction is not only relevant to differentiate technological from organisational aspects, but also to differentiate profit-oriented from non-profit platforms – like some platform cooperatives – as the capitalist profit imperative already forms a structural determinant constraining the possibilities to organise a platform. This section looks at the digital platform as a particular business model that captures value in the form of profits.

Digital platform businesses generate revenue through two kinds of channels, or, in more critical terms, to types of “rents”. First, direct rents are extracted by “charging [workers,] vendors, borrowers, those with assets to share, etc. ... for transacting via their infrastructures” (Langley & Leyshon, 2017, p. 23). This rent is extracted either as a fee on each transaction processed via the platform, or as a subscription fee for (privileged) access to the network (Wiesböck et al., 2023). Indirect rents, the second source of revenue, are understood as rents extracted via “automated targeted advertising and data harvesting and analytics” (Langley & Leyshon, 2017, p. 23). Data is not only used for targeted advertising, but also for optimising operations and developing new products. Digital platforms thus perform what van Doorn and Vijay (2024, pp. 1144-1145) call “‘dual value production’ wherein the monetary value of the service provided is complemented by the use and speculative value of the data produced during the gig”. The speculative value is especially interesting for funding rounds, as investors seem to be particularly interested in tech-companies that generate lots of data (van Doorn & Vijay, 2024). Attracting investors is an essential part in the digital platforms’ business cycle. As laid out above, digital platforms have high fix costs and, therefore, require large investments at the beginning of their operations. At the same time, the viability of these businesses depends on (fast) growth, sometimes in winner-takes-all (or winner-takes-most) markets, and revenues can be generated only at a later stage when a large network has been established. These

characteristics make these investments very risky. Digital platform businesses often run losses for a very long time, relying on low prices for fast growth in order to secure a dominant market position (EC, 2021). Uber, for example, recorded profits for the first time in its history in 2023, after fifteen years in business (Fairwork, 2024; Hawkins, 2024). To attract users, low prices for one side of the platform are often achieved through “cross-subsidisation”, meaning that one side subsidises the other, for example, when workers have to pay a price for using a platform whereas customers can use it for free. If successful, this strategy puts the platform in a very powerful position where it dominates the market, users have become dependent on its infrastructure and it can extract rents from both sides as well as through the monetarisation of users’ data (Doctorow, 2025).

Digital platform businesses thus rely on long-term, high risk capital investments which often come from venture capital (VC) funds (Langley & Leyshon, 2017; Srnicek, 2017; Vandaele, 2024). VC funds are composed of wealthy individuals and institutional investors (pension funds, insurance companies, endowments, banks and cash-rich corporations) and their goal is to invest in early-stage, high-growth companies with the potential for substantial returns (high risk, high return): “When capitalising on unproven start-up firms with a rapid growth potential in return for equity stakes, fund portfolios are expected to contain only a minority of investments that will ultimately pay-off” (Langley & Leyshon, 2017, p. 24). VC firms aim to identify and fund start-ups that have the potential to become successful businesses and eventually provide large returns on investment (ROI), often through an exit event like an acquisition (larger company buying the start-up), an initial public offering (IPO, the company going public by listing on a stock exchange) or a secondary sell, where VC sells its equity stake to another investor or firm. Due to the property structure of the start-up and the high risk involved, VC funds engage in close monitoring to follow the start-up’s progress through regular updates, board meetings, and occasionally direct involvement in key decisions. VC funds thus have substantial means to discipline the management to perform well financially. In the case of labour platforms, this pressure is often passed on to the workers (Vandaele, 2024).

A specific business model that coincides with investor requirements of high returns and the structure of added value within the platform company is the so called “lean platform” (Srnicek, 2017). Lean platforms focus their activities and ownership claims on the steps in the value chain that generate the highest returns and try to outsource all other steps. This enables the company to maximise ROI as costs and responsibilities accompanying ownership rights for less profitable steps in the value chain are outsourced to other actors. The core asset of the digital platform – the one able to generate the highest rents – is the digital infrastructure (the software) and the

accompanying data it generates: “Lean platforms operate through a hyper-outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced. All that remains is a bare extractive minimum – control over the platform that enables a monopoly rent to be gained” (Srnicek, 2017, p. 43). Lean platforms include all kinds of digital platforms from location-based DLPs like the care platform Helping (Bor, 2021) to on-demand platforms and capital platforms. As Goodwin (2015) aptly described: “Uber, the world’s largest taxi company, owns no vehicles ... Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory. And Airbnb, the world’s largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate”. How many of these digital platform companies that still have to prove the viability of their business model will survive in the end, and how many are simply kept alive by the “good will” of investors remains to be seen. Langley and Leyshon (2017) suspect, however, that with an increasing volume of venture capital being invested into digital platforms competing for a monopolistic or oligopolistic market, the almost inevitable failure of many of them might cause a bigger disruption than a simple correction to the market.

To summarise, platform companies create economic benefits by lowering transaction costs first and foremost through network effects. They profit from economies of scale and scope and the provision of risk affine capital to support their strategy of rapid growth through unsustainably low prices and cross-subsidisation to achieve a monopoly – a strategy that results in running on red numbers for a long time. Once in this position, however, a platform business can start generating profits either by increasing rents for users – who are now dependent on the platform – or by selling products to third parties based on the data they capture.

4.2 Digital labour platforms and platform work

Digital labour platforms are a subset of digital platforms. While digital capital platforms “connect costumers with providers who lend money, lease assets or sell goods (e.g. Airbnb, HomeAway, Etsy, Amazon, eBay)” (EC, 2021, p. 33), DLPs connect customers with service providers (e.g. Foodora, Uber, Helping, Fiverr).

Digital labour platforms can be defined as digital infrastructures that enable interactions between consumers and providers of services, and in doing so determine the rules governing such interactions (EC, 2021). These rules determine the nature of interactions to varying degrees. While marketplace-like platforms, for example, may regulate less strictly, on-demand platforms often use complex automated decision-making systems to manage workers and shape the work process in a profound way. *Platform work* is defined as any work that is mediated through a digital labour platform (including the case where there is an intermediary, e.g. a

subcontractor, between the platform and the worker) (Directive (EU) on improving working conditions in platform work 2024 [EUPWD, 2024]). *Automated decision-making systems* (often referred to as *algorithmic management*) are “systems which are used to take or support, through electronic means, decisions that significantly affect persons performing platform work” (EUPWD, 2024), such as recruitment, access to the service, earnings, safety and health, working time, termination of their accounts, etc. For example, food delivery platforms use algorithmically managed ranking systems that determine the order in which new tasks are distributed among couriers (Doctorow, 2025). Thus, if a courier works less or declines more offers than others, they will be automatically assigned a lower ranking, which means they receive only those job offers that have not been taken by workers in higher ranks.

4.2.1 Conceptualising platform work

The conceptualisation of platform work depends on the role the platform occupies in the relationship between client(s) and worker(s), which is often ambiguous and unknown because of the opaque nature of algorithmic intermediation (Piasna, 2024). Most conceptualisations depict platform work as a relationship between three separate entities, similar to figure 2: the platform, the client and the worker with the black box of intermediation in between (EC, 2021; Hauben et al., 2020; Kilhoffer et al., 2020). Although this conceptualisation has the advantage of being broad and easy to grasp, it overlooks the different roles the platform can assume in this relationship, deemphasises the connection between platform and algorithm, and ultimately resembles and abets an interpretation of the platform as mere intermediary.



Figure 1: Self-employment

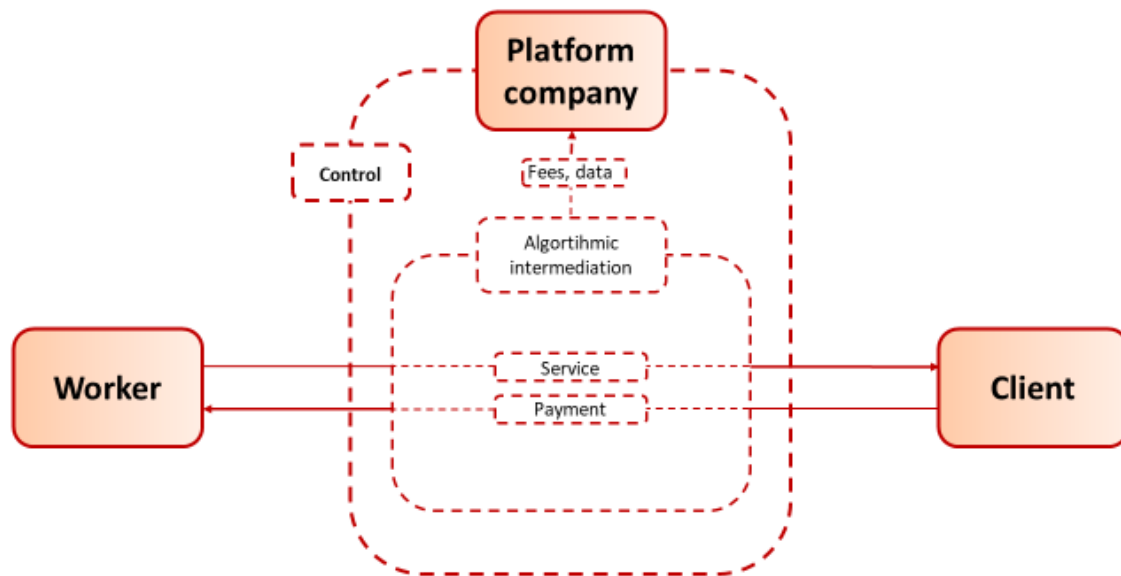


Figure 2: Platform work as self-employed work

In fact, depending on what we assume to be the role of the platform company, we can conceptualise platform work either as self-employed work or as an employment relationship. Figure 1 depicts a simplified conceptualisation of self-employment. Figure 2 conceptualises platform work as self-employed work, showing how the introduction of the platform company alters this relationship. A simplified model of the employment relationship is provided by figure 3. The figures 4 and 5 demonstrate how this relationship changes when we introduce the platform with either the platform (figure 4) or the client (figure 5) assuming the role of employer. The dotted lines represent those steps of the transaction process that take place within the infrastructure provided by the platform. The mechanisms of them are known only to the platform company and remain more or less opaque to outsiders (including workers and clients). For some types of platform work, it is possible to have more than one client per transaction, which makes the conceptualisation a bit more complex but does not change it fundamentally. For example, food delivery platforms typically have two types of clients per transaction: the person receiving food and the restaurant preparing it.

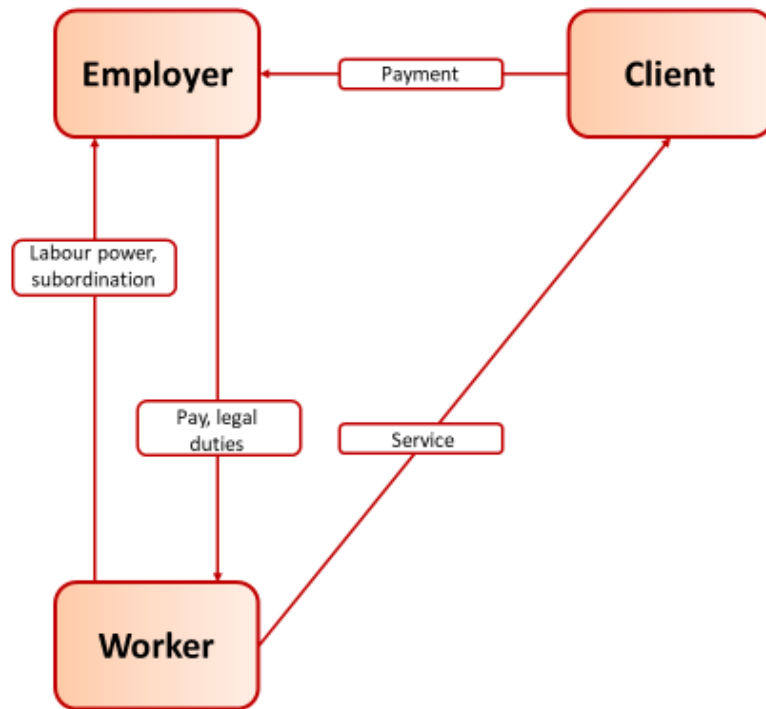


Figure 3: Standard employment

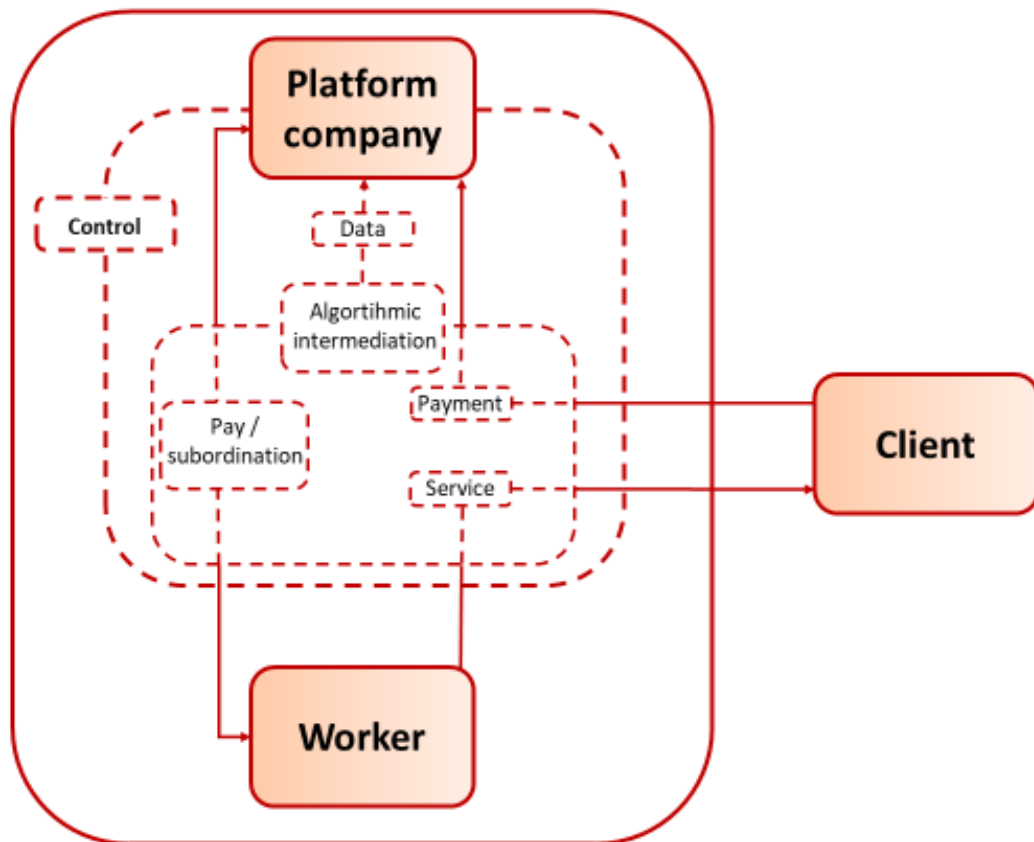


Figure 4: Platform work as standard employment with the platform company as employer

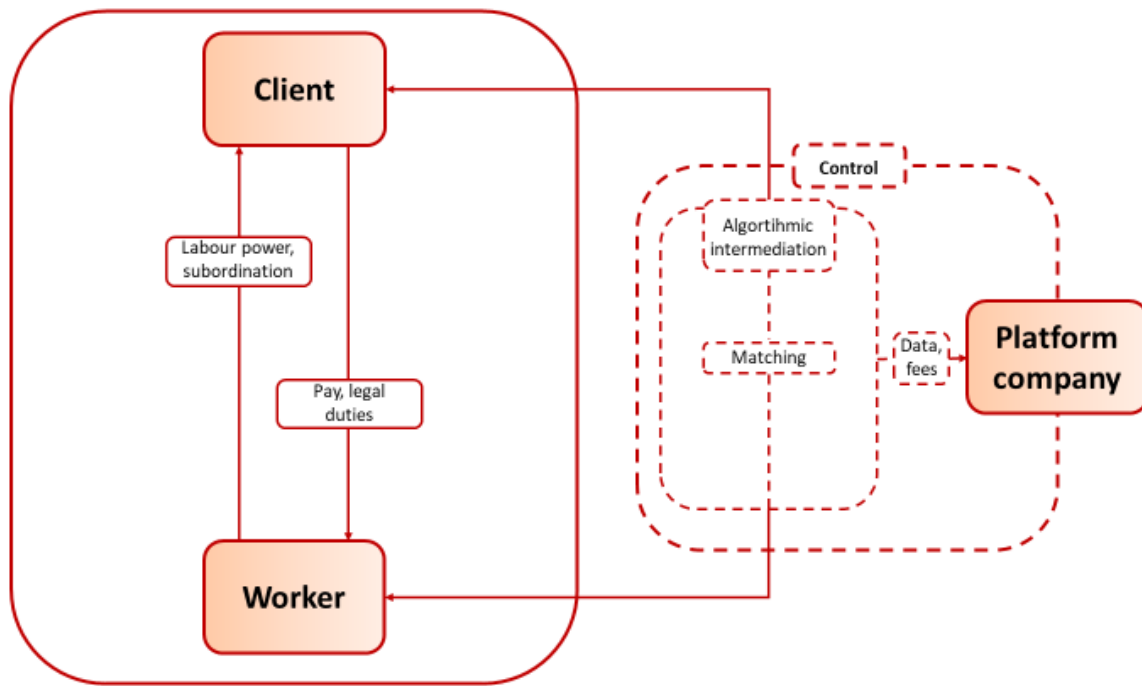


Figure 5: Platform work as standard employment with the client as employer

The advantage of conceptualising platform work in this way is that we can see at a glance that, first, there are many ways in which platforms position themselves between client(s) and worker(s). And, second, that the legitimacy of this (self-)depiction of either employer or mere intermediary depends on the functions performed by algorithmic intermediation, i.e. whether it merely matches client and worker, processes the payment transaction (and may even determine prices), or subordinates the worker (to an extent justifying the classification of an employment relationship). Whatever the employment relationship, platform companies collect vast amounts of data both from workers and clients as well as from their interactions, which are used to improve the efficiency of digital intermediation. Revenue is generated by collecting fees either per transaction (if the payment is processed via the platform) or subscription (including practices of cross-subsidisation).

For example, many *on-demand platforms* for food-delivery or ride-hailing, such as Foodora or Uber, depict themselves as mere intermediaries between self-employed workers and clients. They pass on incoming orders to workers, process payments and collect a fee for each transaction. They often apply extensive algorithmic management tools to guarantee availability of workers and smooth operation.

Market-place platforms, including cleaning platforms such as care.com or haushaltshilfe24.at and extrasauber.at in Vienna, provide a digital interface where clients can choose workers directly. Some platforms (e.g. extrasauber.at) display self-employed workers or workers that

are employed by an external employer and collect transaction fees. Others (e.g. *haushaltshilfe24.at* and *betreut.at*) merely give legal advice for customers to employ workers and refrain from processing payments. Thus, workers should be employed by clients directly. As payment and service provision both take place outside of the platform's infrastructure and supervision, algorithmic management does not play the same role as for on-demand platforms and revenue is generated through subscription rather than transaction fees.

Cases of platform companies assuming the role of the employer are rare. Until recently, the food delivery platform *Lieferando* in Vienna provided an example of this kind (Kainrath, 2025): Clients (restaurants and consumers) used the app to find each other, and *Lieferando* then assigned the delivery service to a worker who was employed by the platform company.

4.2.2 Classifications of platform work

As we have seen from the discussion of the definition above, platform work is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of different types of work, forms of organisation of the labour process including the legal status of the workers, levels of worker autonomy, distributions in price-setting power between the parties and so on. This broadness in conceptualising platform work mirrors the legal uncertainty that exists around this new type of work. With such a broad term, the explanatory and performative value of classifying a certain type of work as platform work is limited. Thus, it is crucial to specify certain parameters when inquiring a specific type of platform work.

In the literature on platform work, platform work is usually classified along three axes: the location, the task complexity and the distribution of power to allocate and define tasks between the actors (EC, 2021; Hauben et al., 2020; Kilhoffer et al., 2020). Concerning the first axis, the work can be either performed on-location, such as delivery or household services, or online, such as IT or online design services. This differentiation has implications for other relevant characteristics of the workforce. For example, although isolation and atomisation are an issue for platform workers in general, online workers working from their homes are usually even more isolated and therefore often even further away from any collectivisation processes (Piasna, Zwysen & ILO, 2022).

Although it is often difficult to define the complexity of a task – cleaning, for example, which is often considered a low-skilled domestic task, is sometimes carried out alongside care services, which require substantial skills – task complexity, too, has important implications for other factors including size of the reserve army (and therefore price-setting/bargaining power) and chances of learning and career development. Kilhoffer et al. (2020) distinguish between

routine tasks that do not require a high skill level (such as transportation, cleaning, food delivery, clickwork), complex tasks (such as online content creation or reviewing and testing products) and creative tasks, which is profession-based and requires the learning of new skills on a regular basis (such as IT tasks or certain caring activities). Platform workers engaged in low-skilled, routine tasks – such as clickwork, where workers tag images – are “the least likely to learn new things” and often have little to no price-setting power (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 60).

The third axes – also termed “allocation of work” (Kilhoffer et al., 2020) or “degree of control” (EC, 2021) – captures the way in which the allocation and specification of tasks is organised. The power to allocate and define tasks can either be in the hands of the platform (“platform-determined”), the client (“client-determined”), or the worker (“worker-determined”) (Eurofound, 2018; Haas et al., 2024). Food-delivery services are usually platform-determined: the DLP creates an algorithm that allocates the orders of clients to the riders and defines, too a large extent, order, timeframe and method of its completion. In an online marketplace scenario with low levels of algorithmic control – chosen by many DLPs for domestic work, care services or creative online tasks – it might be the worker choosing between clients’ offers or the other way around, depending on their respective abundance, dependence and bargaining power.

4.2.3 The relevance of platform labour for Europe and Austria

Measuring the extent and characteristics of platform work is marked with technical challenges, such as cross-border work, undeclared work, high turn-over of workers and high heterogeneity in terms of the tasks performed, employment types, working times and economic dependence. Moreover, national authorities so far have struggled or been unwilling to access data on platforms and platform workers, resulting in a lack of official data (EC, 2021) – a situation that will change to a certain extent by October 2026, when the EU’s directive on improving working conditions in platform work (EUPWD) must be implemented by all EU Member States. Correspondingly, estimates on the size and prevalence of platform work differ and studies can often merely provide a limited snapshot of activities (Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Sarter, 2024).

Nonetheless, there have been large-scale studies providing insights into size, characteristics and developments of platform work. One approach, chosen by the Centre for European Studies (CEPS) in a study for the European Commission, is to characterise the DLP economy in terms of number of DLPs and consolidated revenues generated by them (CEPS, 2021). Figure 6 displays the growth of the DLP economy in the EU27 from 463 active platforms in 2016 to 520 in 2020. Overshadowing this moderate increase in the number of active DLPs, the revenues

they generated have increased almost fivefold during that period, from an estimated €3 billion in 2016 to €14 billion in 2020 (see figure 7), representing 0.1 percent of the EU27’s GDP of that year.

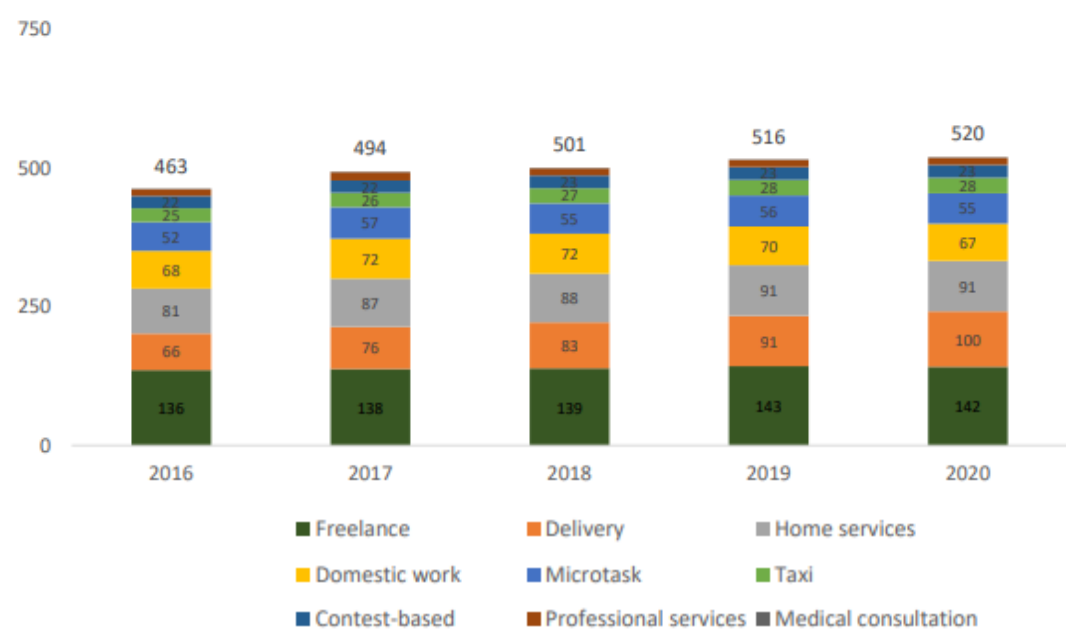


Figure 6: Number of DLPs active in the EU27 between 2016 and 2020 (N=590) across types of DLPs

Source: CEPS (2021)

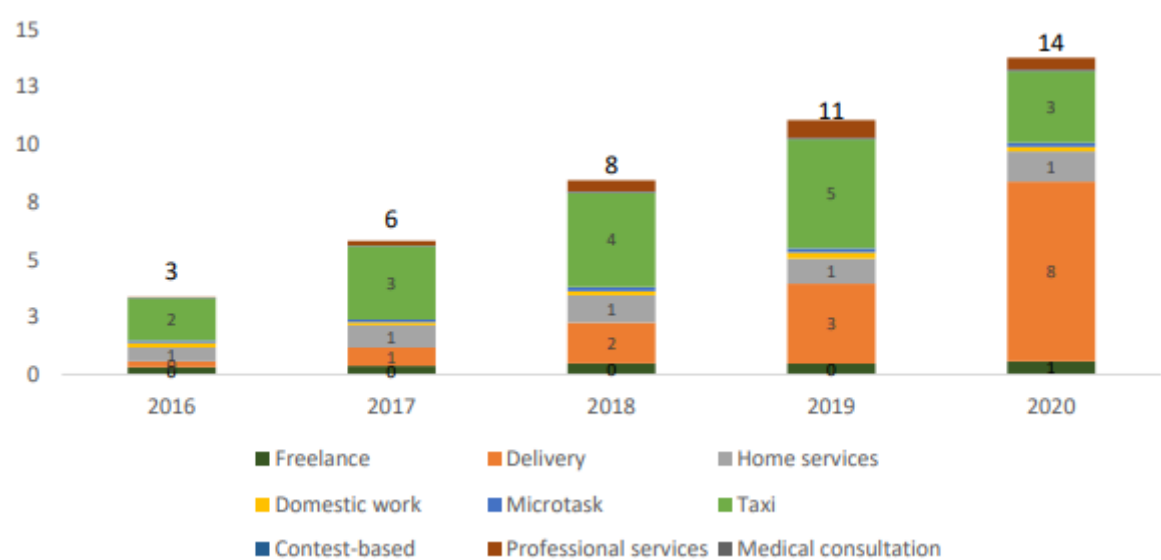


Figure 7: Size of DLP economy in € billion consolidated revenues

Source: CEPS (2021)

In figure 7, we can see that the revenues generated by DLPs providing delivery services have increased dramatically between 2019 and 2020 (likely also due to the effects of the Covid-19

pandemic), have overtaken the platform mediated taxi sector and accounted for more than half of the total revenues generated in the DLP economy in 2020.

Another approach to measure the extent of platform labour is through surveying the working age population in Europe. First, the Platformisation of Work in Europe surveys carried out in thirteen European countries between 2016 and 2019 by FEPS, UNI Europa and University of Hertfordshire (Huws et al., 2019) estimate a proportion ranging between 4.7 percent in the UK to 28.5 percent in Croatia of the adult population engaging in some form of platform work at least weekly. They also find that platform work makes up “less than 10% of all income for the largest group of platform workers in all countries” (Huws et al., 2019, p. 12) and that the share of workers who earn at least 50 percent of their income via platforms ranges between 1.5 percent in the Netherlands to 8.2 percent in Czechia. Interestingly – despite their relatively low revenues – Huws et al. (2019) document online work and household work as the most common forms of platform work, exceeding ride-hailing and delivery work.¹

The Joint Research Centre (JRC)’s COLLEEM surveys from 2017 and 2018 which covered sixteen EU countries provide an estimation for the share of people working on platforms regularly of 11 percent for 2018 (Urzi Brancati et al., 2020). Again, those relying on platform work for their main income – either working 20 hours a week via platforms or earn at least 50 percent of their income doing so – are estimated to be only 1.4 percent.

Finally, estimations derived from the ETUI Internet and Platform Work Surveys from 2018 to 2019 and from 2021 respectively by Piasna, Zwysen and Drahokoupil (2022) show even lower proportions. They disclose that in the 14 European countries under study, only 0.7 percent of respondents worked at least 20 hours a week. Even the share of people engaging in platform work at least once a week was only at 1.4 percent and those performing platform work at least once a month 2.8 percent respectively.

The studies conducted by Huws et al. (2019) and Piasna, Zwysen and Drahokoupil (2022) also include country- and sector-specific data. Estimations on the proportion of the working age population engaging in platform work in Austria range from 5.1 percent (Piasna, Zwysen, & Drahokoupil, 2022) to 18.9 percent (Huws et al., 2019). The share of the Austrian working age population performing platform mediated household services is estimated to be 1 percent according to the former and 6 percent according to the latter. A problem that is particularly

¹ One possible explanation for this discrepancy could be the prevalence of undeclared work in the household sector, which by definition is not listed in the accounting records. Note also that their research period ends before the start of Covid-19.

relevant in measuring platform mediated domestic work, however, is the high prevalence of undeclared work in this sector (Wiesböck et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding these substantial differences in measuring the prevalence of platform work in Europe, there is consensus among scholars that both labour platforms and platform work have seen rapid growth in the past decade and will continue to grow and expand (EC, 2021; Hauben et al., 2020; Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna, Zwysen, & ILO, 2022). The European Commission (2021, p. 6) notes, for example, that “the revenues for the platform economy in the EU ... are likely to grow in the upcoming few years ... [and] the numbers of people opting to work in the platform economy ... will also grow – to an estimated 42.7 million ... by 2030”. Concerning platform mediated care work more specifically, Dowling (2022, p. 114) highlights that in Europe “the personal and household services sector is the second-fastest growing sector behind ICT ... and in fact with the platformization of care these two sectors are becoming more intertwined”.

Whilst the experience of the multitude of people working via platforms already lends great relevance to the study of the phenomenon of platform work, its relevance is by no means limited to its mere expansion. In fact, one characteristic about platform work is repeatedly pointed out in the literature that studies it: the fact that the management, organisational and legal practices that characterise labour platforms extend far beyond the boundaries of its own sphere. This “platformisation” (van Doorn & Vijay, 2024), “uberisation” (Davis, 2016) or “gigifying” (Keller, 2022) of the economy indicates a broader trend in labour markets: the use of digital means to increase the division and outsourcing of labour (Weil, 2017), deepen workplace surveillance, data gathering and performance appraisal (Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna, Zwysen, & ILO, 2022) and circumvent legal regulations (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021). Aside from pulling down labour standards across industries (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021; Kilhoffer et al., 2020), labour platforms function as a “... quasi-laboratory space for businesses. In these unregulated areas, they can experiment with different and more exploitative means of employment and, if successful, these models can then be rolled out to other parts of the economy” (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021, pp. 44-45). In particular, scholars working on precarity warn against the potential of a broader expansion of precarious conditions in the labour market due to the governance practices that are explored on labour platforms (Altenried et al., 2021; Crouch, 2019; Piasna, 2024).

Thus, DLPs can be seen as “infrastructural agents” (van Doorn, 2017, p. 902) that transform labour-capital relations and the related forms of struggle: “Developments in the platform economy are thus crucial in providing lessons for collective interest representation and

mobilization in changing labour markets” (Piasna, Zwysen, & ILO, 2022, p. 36). In particular, the systematic refusal of DLPs to take on the legal role of the employer undermines the institutional containment of social antagonisms in the form of social partnership, which is contingent on the organisation of employees and employers in institutionalised interest groups that can enter into negotiations with each other (Piasna, 2024, p. 11). Furthermore, it poses a challenge to welfare policy, which is structured around standard employment and dependent on employers contributing their share to social security (EC, 2021).

The extent of work that is organised via digital platforms is only one side of the so called “platformisation of labour”. The relevance of digital platforms organising labour also stems from the pioneering role it inhibits in experimenting with new forms of governance mechanisms underpinned by digital technologies, to which we shall turn now.

4.2.4 Governance in labour platforms: Profiting from carelessness

The governance mechanisms implemented in most DLPs correspond to the business model of lean platforms introduced in chapter 1.2, which is characterised by extensive outsourcing and very limited ownership claims. DLPs navigate an organisational structure that externalises control and risk (and associated subsequent costs) while keeping its users in a position of structural dependence that allows for the extraction of rents (Altenried et al., 2021; Vallas & Schor, 2020).

Historical similarities of such employment and organisational practices can be found in the early era of industrial capitalism, where production took place in the dispersed homes of “self-employed” and economically dependent textile workers, including practices such as home-based production, piecework payment and subcontracted work (Crouch, 2019; Piasna, Zwysen, & ILO, 2022). As a new form of organisation, DLPs are significantly less regulated than “standard” companies and exploit this regulatory gap until it is closed by the institutionalised achievements of labour struggles.

DLPs minimise costs and responsibilities by externalising ownership and employment relations onto users (Vallas & Schor, 2020). This provides users with a degree of autonomy that ideally extends to the point where they retain responsibility for the outcome of their actions while also serving the platform’s interests in profit making. If either of these parameters is compromised – for example, if the legal situation changes or users find a way to challenge or circumvent the platform’s rules that are detrimental to their interests – the platform will alter its rules accordingly. This externalisation of responsibilities includes practices such as non-standard forms of employment like (bogus) self-employment or undeclared work, relaxing personnel

selection criteria and outsourcing performance evaluation onto customers (Vallas & Schor, 2020). This governance regime that Vallas and Schor (2020, p. 282) call “permissive potentates” is characterised by valorising “aspects of its environment that it does not itself own”. It gives DLPs a competitive edge by enabling them to offer services at lower prices than their non-platform competitors. Which specific functions remain under the DLP’s direct control and which are outsourced – including the allocation of tasks, pricing of services, specification of work methods, or control over work schedules – varies greatly between platforms and depends on the nature of the work, the kind of relationship between worker and customer as well as legal conditions.

Especially in the case of DLPs, lower prices are not (only) the result of efficiency gains through reduced transaction costs in searching and matching. In fact, efficiency gains are limited in the case of DLPs. Yes, the matching process might be easier, thus reducing transaction costs for users on both sides, especially when the network is already well established. But in the end, the service that is mediated via the platform still requires a worker to perform it and entails subsequent labour costs. If remunerations were the same, independent of whether they are working via a digital platform or not, prices would only marginally differ due to more efficient searching and matching. In fact, traditional firms could achieve the same efficiency gains with regular employment by implementing digital intermediation on their own (Lieferando in Vienna, for example, used to employ its workers). The stark difference in prices, in other words, must stem from a different source: the reducing of labour costs both by circumventing social security contributions, statutory wage continuation requirements and protection against dismissal as well as by paying lower effective remuneration (including expenses such as equipment, insurance, paid holiday, etc.). The promise of making services such as cleaning, caring, delivery, driving, designing, translating and so on accessible to a larger number of people is predicated on the increased exploitation of a precarious class. This is what makes low prices possible in the first place. In this case, then, the wealth of some is structurally linked to the misery of others (Charusheela, 2003).

These considerations cast severe doubts on the question whether DLPs could even operate (profitably) if they would legally fall into the category of employer, evidenced also by the intensive lobbying of DLPs targeted towards chapter II of the EUPWD, which was intended to clarify the employment relationship between DLPs and workers, and was heavily watered down as a result of these actions (Pfeiffer, 2024). According to van Doorn (2017, p. 902), by avoiding the role of the employer, DLPs “can save up to 30% in labor costs”. This also led Harris and Kruger (2015, p. 8) – two scholars of the business-oriented think tank “The Hamilton Project”

– to claim that “[f]orcing these new forms of work into a traditional employment relationship could be an existential threat to the emergence of online-intermediated work”.

4.2.4.1 Risks for workers: Non-employment and algorithmic management

These observations paint a picture of DLPs as companies that systematically outsource responsibility for the risks inherent in their business model to other actors (Altenried et al., 2021; Gawer & Srnicek, 2021; Piasna, 2024). DLPs externalise risk and subsequent costs on workers, consumers, the state/taxpayers and other employers. Risks are shifted onto workers by the very common practice of offering only non-standard forms of employment. A great majority of active DLPs (92 percent) organise work through service contracts (European Commission & CEPS, 2021):

In general, platforms engage their workers as self-employed for economic reasons. When platforms enter markets with prevailing practices based on employment relationships, they circumvent national legislation on working conditions, social protection and other requirements and standards, thereby reducing their costs and creating a competitive advantage (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 106).

Many of the safeguards which are effective in standard employment do not apply for non-standard employment. These safeguards distribute risk in favour of the worker, provide them with labour rights and impose certain responsibilities onto the employer: “on average, 55 percent of self-employed workers in the EU lack unemployment benefits, 38 percent lack sickness pay, and 46 percent of self-employed women lack maternity benefits” (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021, p. 47). Risks related to working equipment, work environment and physical and mental health are shifted, first and foremost, onto the individual worker, who often has to provide and maintain their own equipment and is not covered by employer’s liability insurance or extensive social security insurance. This implies a shift towards the recommodification of labour (Piasna, 2024; van Doorn & Vijay, 2024). This was particularly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, where “employees have seen extensions to sick leave and unemployment leave, as well as the widespread adoption of various short-time work schemes, [whereas] platform workers have largely lacked access to these provisions” (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021, pp. III-IV). Lack of support for sick leave and pensions, moreover, make workers more financially precarious and vulnerable both in the short- and long-term. Domestic workers, in particular, often work illegally and “face long-term health risks from the constant use of cleaning products and potential accidents in clients’ homes” as well as “threats, harassment, and even attacks from clients” (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021, p. 47).

By refraining from employing workers, DLPs also shift a large part of entrepreneurial risk onto the workers. Whereas in an employment relationship, workers enjoy a guaranteed income

during their working hours, the risk that there will not be enough demand is passed on to workers. While this leads to lower labour costs for the management, it generates income insecurity for the workers, leads to unpaid working hours and generally weakens their position with regard to DLPs and customers (Kilhoffer et al., 2020).

For labour, then, the DLPs' business model translates into the spatial dispersion of workers and may entail "weak institutionalization of labor control, or what we term the 'retreat from control,' and the use of economic dependency to discipline labor" (Schor et al., 2020, p. 837). This kind of labour governance can also be observed in other precarised sectors where temporary work is the norm such as in 24-hour-care (Durisova, 2017). On the other hand, the platforms' business model can also lead to an increase in (indirect) control through digital means. As DLPs must avoid direct control over working times to circumvent being classified as an employer while at the same time ensuring that clients have access to services instantly, platforms implement other tools to govern the workforce. This inherent dilemma of enabling flexibility for the worker while guaranteeing service on demand for the client is not only resolved through an oversupply of workers but often combined with the use of algorithmic management which both come at the expense of workers' flexibility.

Algorithmic management as defined above is digital, automated decision-making that significantly affects platform workers, which is based on data acquired by monitoring user interactions. Rooted in a digital application installed on the workers' private devices, it allows for remote management of a dispersed workforce. Algorithmic management can be analytically divided into direction, evaluation and disciplination. Direction concerns "the specification of what needs to be performed, in what order and time period, and with what degree of accuracy" (what to do and how to do it) (Kellogg et al., 2020, p. 369). Practices include, for example, the specification of routes for transportation or delivery workers. Evaluation denotes the assessment of the workers' performance in doing their job and can be performed either by an algorithm (computing, for example, the number of job declines or speed of a worker), or by customers. Finally, disciplination "entails the punishment and reward of workers so as to elicit cooperation and enforce compliance with the employer's direction of the labour process" (Kellogg et al., 2020, p. 369).

While conditions outside the DLP (such as labour market discrimination and the size of the reserve army) certainly play an important role in disciplining workers, DLPs have been documented to deploy a number of techniques to intensify disciplination, including piece rates, competition for tasks and reputational systems as well as more obvious "nudges" and punishments (Herr, 2018; Piasna, 2024). Carrots encompass measures such as higher chances

of receiving work if one behaves in the ways intended by the platform, better remuneration when starting platform work, or the gamification of work, i.e. the transfer of typical game elements and processes into non-game contexts with the aim of changing behaviour and increasing motivation (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021). In the US, for example, Uber pays high remuneration for drivers that start using the App. Once the driver has purchased a car, however, and thus made an investment that substantially increases their dependence on income from the platform, Uber decreases the payment, leaving the worker no other option but to accept lower prices (Doctorow, 2025). Among the sticks are bad ratings (Bor, 2021; Piasna, 2024; Wiesböck et al., 2023) and threat of dismissal or, more accurately, the threat of no longer assigning work orders to the worker (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021). Algorithmic replacing has immensely simplified the process of firing and replacing a worker, for example by simply revoking access to an app. Among domestic labour platforms, close and intimate relationships between workers and customers have also been found to perform a disciplining function as they complicate workers' position to demand more or set boundaries (Bor, 2021).

Algorithmic management also has the effect of dispersing authority and shifting it towards a supposedly “neutral” instance, while at the same time concealing it (van Doorn, 2017). Algorithms are typically opaque to outsiders, leading to information asymmetries between workers and management that lead to constant but subtle control (Keller, 2022). This also make it very difficult to understand and thus challenge changes and decisions concerning prices, organisation of work or punishments (EC, 2021; Kilhoffer et al., 2020).

Corresponding to the different types of platform designs, the extent, intensity and form of algorithmic management can differ significantly. On-demand platforms with a lot of power to allocate work (such as Uber or Foodora) use algorithmic management extensively, often monitoring, directing and evaluating the whole labour process. Many market-place platforms (like care.com) with customers and workers choosing each other, on the other hand, “primarily impact the hiring process through sorting, ranking, and rendering visible large pools of workers” (Ticona et al., 2018, p. 8), but refrain from any monitoring or control over the labour process.

4.2.4.2 Risks for the state, consumers, employers: DLPs as free-riders

Risks for consumers stem from low entry barriers to work and lack of instructions, training or qualification. Such practices effectively shift the risk of receiving low quality services by potentially unqualified workers onto costumers. The work of monitoring the qualification of workers or providing instructions is often externalised to be performed by consumers via consumer ratings and on-site instructions (Kilhoffer et al., 2020).

Risk is also shifted onto public institutions as most people working through platforms, who are not employed and therefore do not have access to the same protection measures, are at higher risk of depending on welfare measures provided by the state. In addition, Kilhoffer et al. (2020, p. 72) note that “platform work may contribute to the underfunding of social security schemes”. In addition to the burden on public welfare funds, DLPs also shift responsibility for training, education and development to public bodies and, in the absence of clear and consistent regulation, induce judicial costs due to courts having to clarify employment status for individual cases (EC, 2021). Finally, there is also a risk for competitors in the industries where DLPs enter as they create an unlevel playing field and unfair competition. This is increasingly recognised by employer’s organisations within the EU (Piasna, 2024).

These observations have led scholars to suspect that the operation of DLPs “could ... be considered ‘parasitic’ since they (opportunistically) hinge on fractures or openings within traditional welfare state regimes as they shift to workfare regimes” (Vandaele et al., 2024, p. 9). Indeed, concerning worker satisfaction and pay, conclusions drawn from a study on the basis of 112 in-depth interviews with workers on seven platforms (including the capital platform Airbnb) by Schor et al. (2020, p. 855) confirmed that platforms are, in fact, free-riding on conventional employers “who provide the security and stability to make platform labor desirable”. This result coincides with the findings of the large-scale studies summarised in section 2.2, which displayed only a small minority of platform workers earning their main income from platform work.

In summary, DLPs navigate an organisational structure that externalises control, risk and subsequent costs, while keeping users in a position of structural dependence that enables the extraction of rents. In terms of labour governance, this includes the practice of refraining from direct control of the work process to avoid being classified as an employer. DLPs that offer on-demand services deploy comprehensive algorithmic management to ensure that, on the one hand, they are not legally recognized as employers and, on the other hand, they can offer immediate availability of services. The rationale is to pass on responsibility for the risks of the business model and externalise follow-up costs, primarily onto workers, but also onto public bodies, other employers and consumers. This structural carelessness results in low prices, fast growth and the possibility to generate profit by charging rents from a large user base.

4.2.5 The platform workforce

As with the general discussion of platform work, it is important not to overemphasise the uniqueness of the workforce and encourage a “platform exceptionalism” discourse (Piasna,

2024). Instead, we have to regard platform workers not as a new or separate category but rather acknowledge that they have a lot in common with other workers in non-standard employment and are part of broader dynamics in the labour markets (Piasna, 2024; Schor et al., 2020). They are

... members of a new service class whose work is directly related to the reproduction of labour power and social relations, and who are thus of central importance for contemporary capitalism, but who do not receive the social and financial recognition they deserve (Fairwork, 2022, p. 2).

The platform workforce is characterised by overqualification (especially for on-location and online low-skill work), and an above average share of students and migrant workers compared to the general labour market, which is driven mainly by migrants from outside the EU (Altenried et al., 2021; Fairwork, 2022; Gebrial, 2024; Zwysen & Piasna, 2024). In their study on DLPs and migrant workers, Zwysen and Piasna (2024, p. 27) find that key reasons for this are lower entry barriers that are especially important for migrants from outside the EU, who “face more regulatory hurdles and who may also experience greater disadvantage and discrimination in the labour market”. They also find that migrants are generally more economically dependent on platform work than native-born workers but earn less relative to them, which can be interpreted as corroborating evidence to other studies (mentioned in section 2.3) that found an inverse relation between economic dependence and the quality of working conditions or worker satisfaction. In other words: those who have a weak labour market position and rely on platform work most are also the ones who are exploited the most. Moreover, their results provide empirical evidence that DLPs do indeed engage in predatory inclusion:

Migrants are at risk of being trapped in platform jobs with few opportunities open to them and, importantly, they tend to experience worse outcomes than majority workers on the same platforms ... [This] may severely harm their long-term prospects and lead to the accumulation of disadvantage and, in the long run, economic and social exclusion (Zwysen & Piasna, 2024, pp. 27-28).

Nevertheless, in their study, the vast majority of platform workers is still native-born. The reason for taking up platform work therefore rather appears to be a precarious starting position, from which an above-average number of migrants (especially from non-EU countries) suffer (EC, 2021; Zwysen & Piasna, 2024).

Besides low entry barriers, autonomy in work organisation and flexibility in choosing the time and type of task are referred to as the main motivations of platform workers in the literature (EC, 2021; Geyer & Prinz, 2022; Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2021). There is disagreement in the literature, however, on the satisfaction of platform workers regarding their flexibility and their preference for independent contractor as opposed to employment status.

The findings of the COLLEEM II survey found that a majority (over 80 percent) were satisfied with the flexibility of working times and locations (EC, 2021). Other studies have also found a preference for independent contractor status, but were subsequently challenged for methodical flaws (Piasna, 2024). Piasna and Drahokoupil (2021), on the other hand, find a stronger preference among platform workers for having employment status. The results of their surveys point to “heterogeneity in preferences regarding schedule flexibility that arises from the degree of worker dependence” (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2021, p. 1415) with workers who are more dependent having little flexibility and thus end up planning “their private lives to fit around ... work” (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2021, p. 1402).

Concerning the gender balance in on-location work, men are clearly overrepresented in the transportation and delivery sector (Kilhoffer et al., 2020), while there is disagreement on the ratio in household services. Huws et al. (2019) finds that household services are predominantly performed by men. A finding which they explain by pointing at services traditionally typed as masculine like household maintenance and electrical work. Kilhoffer et al. (2020) and Piasna, Zwysen and Drahokoupil (2022, p. 27), on the other hand, note that women “represent a large majority of on-location workers (64 per cent) – this category is dominated by young women performing care services”. They also find that migrants are relatively overrepresented in on-location work compared to other forms of platform work (Piasna, Zwysen, & Drahokoupil, 2022). The case studies provided by Wiesböck et al. (2023, 2024) and Bor (2021) support the latter finding of predominantly female and migrant workers in domestic labour platforms.

It seems, therefore, that “worker satisfaction, autonomy, and earnings vary significantly across and within platforms” calling for an analytical approach that “emphasizes labor force diversity, connections to conventional labor markets, and worker dependence” (Schor et al., 2020, p. 833).

4.3 Context: Broader trends and cleaning platforms in Austria

Based on the observation that the emergence and growth of DLPs throughout the economy is part of a broader shift in the organisation of the production process, questions arise about the material conditions which enabled this particular model of accumulation and about the structural links between their emergence and broader social developments. This section addresses the first research question on the structural conditions that led to the emergence of digital labour platforms (Research step 1). From a political economy perspective, DLPs could only emerge due to the existence of the material conditions – technology, capital and labour – required for their production process as well as effective demand on the consumption side.

In terms of production, digital technologies lie at the heart of the DLPs' production process. The core of the DLPs' operations is a software that allows for efficient matching, rapid scaling and the governance mechanisms characteristic for DLPs including the coordination of a spatially dispersed and loosely controlled workforce. Second, DLPs require substantial amounts of capital with high affinity towards risk for a long period. There are two broader dynamics that promote the operation of DLPs by enabling the availability of capital on a global scale: globalisation – understood as the politically enforced “reduction in barriers to international economic activities and increasing mobility, particularly with regard to goods and capital” (EC, 2021, p. 47). And financialisation – in the sense of interest bearing capital expanding into more and more spheres of economic and social reproduction (Christophers & Fine, 2020). A low interest rate environment and the profitability of data harvesting have also increased interest in this risky business model (van Doorn & Vijay, 2024).

Finally, research suggests that DLPs' operations are contingent on a) workers who are already financially secure due to their socio-economic situation outside the platform (e.g. a main income from regular employment) and are therefore not dependent on income from the platform (Schor et al., 2020). And b) a reserve army of precarious potential workers who are dependent on the income from platform jobs. The constant availability of a labour force willing to offer services on DLPs under poor conditions ensures compliance of workers with the DLP's rules and thus the viability of this business model. DLPs hinge on “the gendered and racialized subordination of low-income workers, the unemployed, and the unemployable” (van Doorn, 2017, p. 908).

I argue, therefore, that all policies which reduce the protection of labour, create precarity and increase the individual's dependence on selling their labour power simultaneously contribute to the viability of DLPs' operations, as they create a supply of workers vulnerable to overexploitation. Structural links seem to exist between DLPs and broader developments driving the commodification of labour including neoliberal welfare state reforms and austerity measures (Crouch, 2019), labour market flexibilization/deregulation (Srnicsek, 2017), weakening of organised labour (Fairwork, 2022) and migration policies (Gebrial, 2024; van Doorn & Vijay, 2024).

DLPs usually enter service industries that have already existed before. Rather than benefiting from new services, consumers gain from increased accessibility to services that were previously limited due to high transaction costs or prices (such as delivery, cleaning, caring, teaching, IT, ride hailing and other services). Demand for platform mediated services therefore depends on low prices and easy accessibility, which are achieved through low labour costs and oversupply

of labour. Demand is also driven, however, through crisis tendencies. On the one hand, temporary crises like the Covid-19 crisis have boosted demand for certain platform mediated services such as food delivery (Dowling, 2022; European Commission, 2021). On the other, long-term crises like the care crisis increase demand for services related to care (Altenried et al., 2021; Fraser, 2017). DLPs providing care services are making profit by redistributing vulnerabilities stemming from care gaps through the application of new techniques and technologies. They can thus be seen as part of a “care fix”, which “entails efforts at crisis management that do not resolve one and for all, but merely displace the crisis, thereby perpetuating the structural feature of capitalist economies to off-load the cost of care and social reproduction to unpaid [or underpaid] realms of society” (Dowling, 2022, p. 104).

Figure 8 provides an overview of the determinants for the economic viability of DLPs structured around the analytical categories of technology, capital, labour and effective demand. More specific research areas that overlap with the topic of platform work are displayed in figure 10 at the end of this section.

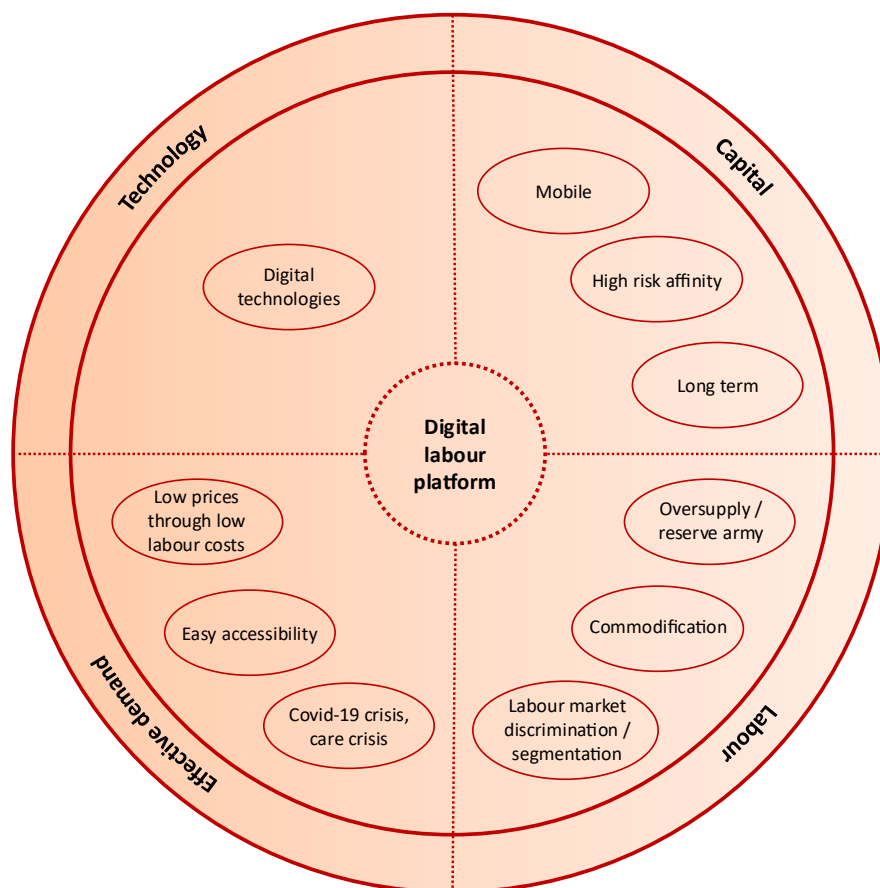


Figure 8: Material conditions for the economic viability of digital labour platforms

In Austria, the comparably strong institutionalisation of organised labour has cushioned some of the effects of these broader developments. For instance, compulsory membership for

employers in the Austrian Chamber of Commerce and for employees in the Chamber of Labour as well as the “statutory ‘erga omnes effect’ which ensures that all employees with an employer bound by a collective agreement are covered” (Fairwork, 2022, p. 9) have ensured collective agreement coverage remaining at 98 percent, even after the financial crisis (see figure 9).

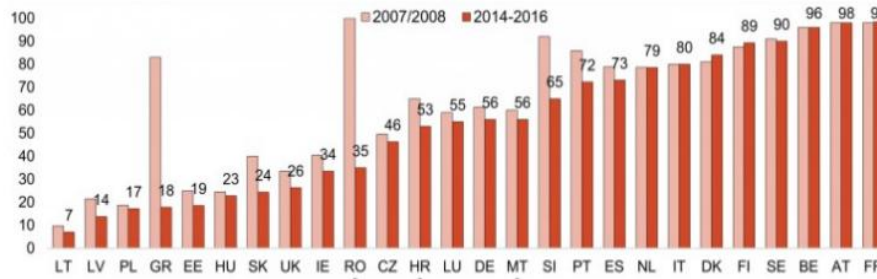


Figure 9: Collective bargaining coverage before and after the world financial crisis, % of workforce
Source: European Trade Union Institute (2019)

In the Austrian labour market and welfare state, there are certainly tendencies towards a transformation from welfare to workfare (Atzmüller, 2009; Dimmel, 2015). However, these are less pronounced than in other European countries (Leibetseder, 2012; Österle & Heitzmann, 2019). Nonetheless, labour market reforms and immigration policies in Austria have led to labour market discrimination especially for non-EU citizens (Atzmüller et al., 2020) and resulted in an increase in unemployment over the last decade, increasing proliferation of non-standard forms of employment and an “internationalisation and tertiarisation of the economy” (Fairwork, 2022, p. 10). Simultaneously, organised labour has weakened – evident in the decline of union density, which fell from 60.1 percent in 1960 to 27 percent in 2024.

In contrast, the cleaning sector is one of the fastest growing industries in Europe (Wiesböck et al., 2024). In Austria, between 2015 and 2019, an average of 158.000 people worked in regular employment in cleaning (Schönherr & Zandonella, 2020). Due to the very common practice of undeclared labour in the industry, the actual figure is likely to be much higher (Institut für Empirische Sozialforschung, 2013). Three DLPs in Austria offer domestic services, including cleaning: [extrasauber.at](https://www.extrasauber.at), [betreut.at](https://www.betreut.at) and [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at). The former processes payments itself and charges transaction fees, while the latter two leave the payment process to users and charge fees upon registration. [Betreut.at](https://www.betreut.at) charges membership fees to customers and workers, while [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) only charges customers. The Fairwork Austria study (Fairwork, 2022) assessed [extrasauber.at](https://www.extrasauber.at) in 2022 and awarded it one out of two points for each of the five categories fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation. The platform therefore performed relatively well compared to other platforms. Wiesböck et al.

(2023, 2024) conducted a case study consisting of 15 interviews with workers from the two other cleaning platforms. A high proportion of female, migrant workers and widespread undeclared work (11 out of 15) led them to the conclusion that “[p]rofit-oriented gig economy platforms make use of this social malaise [the care crisis] to realise new surplus opportunities in a largely unregulated market that is mainly occupied by a female migrant workforce under precarious conditions” (Wiesböck et al., 2023, p. 269). Instead of being neutral intermediaries, they found the DLPs to reproduce and exacerbate race, class and gender inequalities (with sexual harassment being a major issue), and “actively influence work processes and opportunities through forms of control to the benefit of customers and their own interests” (Wiesböck et al., 2023, p. 268).

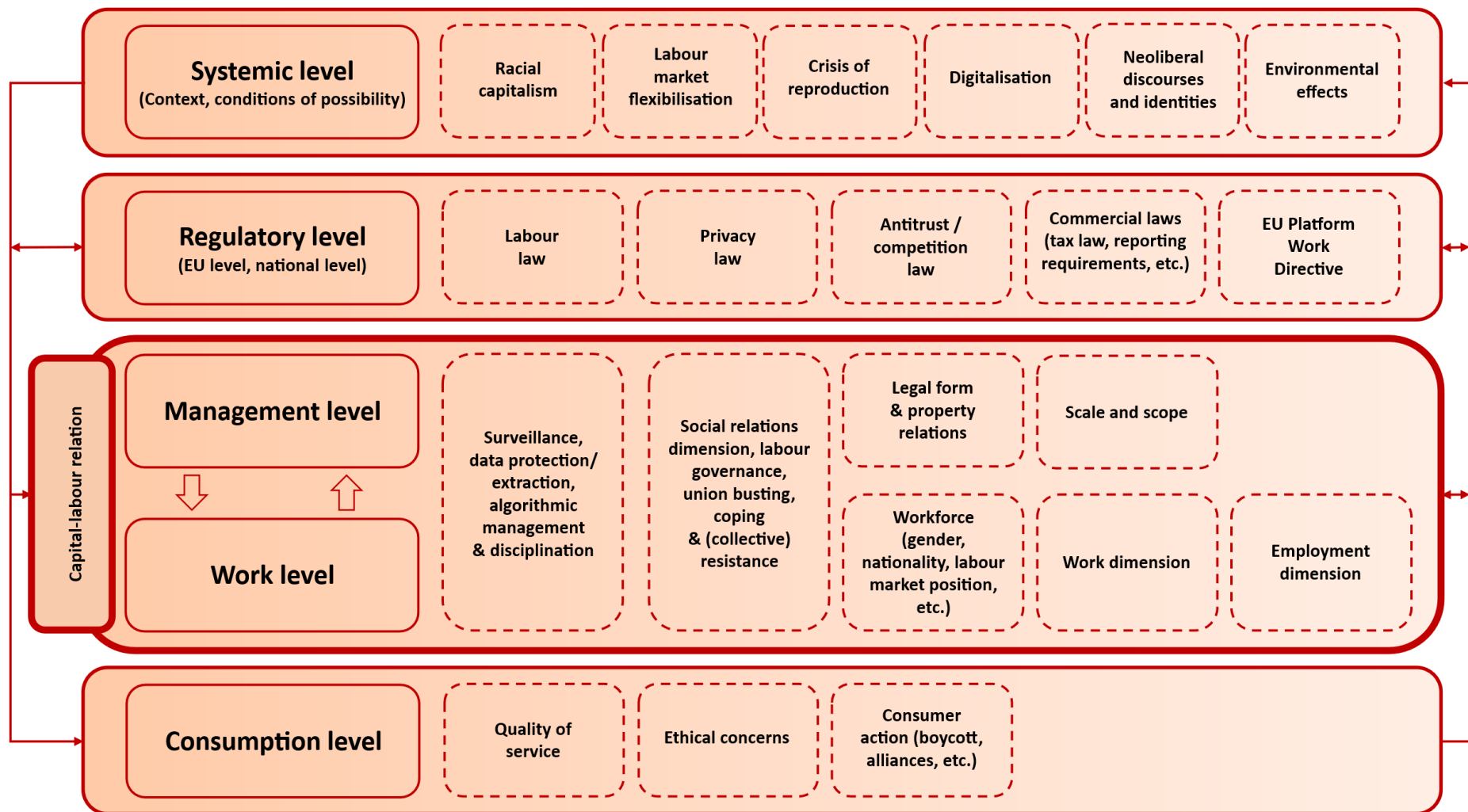


Figure 10: Research areas for platform work

5 Domestic cleaners in the platform economy: Risks, coping mechanisms and worker power

This study analyses the working experiences, working conditions and obstacles and opportunities for worker power of cleaners working via [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at), a DLP intermediating domestic services in Austria. The website belongs to Lemonfrog AG, a company founded in 2007 and based in Zurich, Switzerland. The company operates 17 digital platforms in four countries (Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Spain) with, according to its own figures, two million registered users and 30 employees (Lemonfrog, n.d.). In addition to mediating domestic work, its platforms also provide marketplaces for dating, childcare, elderly care, and tutoring, among other things. On their website, they primarily market themselves as an IT company that develops an efficient product for matching users: “All our platforms are based on a core IT system, which we have expanded into a SaaS solution for marketplaces over the last years. We focus on scalability, loading speed and APIs [Application Programming Interfaces]. Today we are able to launch a new platform in a very short time – without writing a single line of code” (Lemonfrog, n.d.).

On [haushaltshilfe24](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at), clients in need for domestic services such as cleaning, cooking or gardening can scroll through the profiles of workers or post a job offer to find workers providing these services. To be able to post a job offer or contact workers, customers need to pay a membership fee starting with €22,90 per month. Workers, on the other hand, do not have to pay a fee to be able to communicate with clients. The website merely provides an infrastructure for matching, transactions take place outside of its infrastructure. Furthermore, there are no mechanisms in place to prevent illegal employment. [Haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) only provides guidance on how clients should hire workers.

5.1 Characterisation of the sample of workers

My sample of interviewed workers comprises seven workers who are between 22 and 40 years old (see table 4). All workers declare themselves as women who migrated from non-EU countries (Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Serbia) to Vienna. The tasks they perform via the platform include cleaning and doing laundry, with some also doing ironing, cooking, washing dishes, babysitting and gardening.

Name	Age	Citizenship	Gender	Education	Care obligations	Employment status	Undeclared work via platform	Hourly pay in euros	In Vienna since	Working experience with platform	Second income
Pooja	26	India	Female	Bachelors degree	None	Student, part-time employee	Yes	~15	6 years	5 years, >100 households	No
Sandamali	40	Sri Lanka	Female	Masters degree	None	Student	Yes	12-15	Few months	Few months, 9-10 households	Yes
Nirosha	34	Sri Lanka	Female	Bachelors degree, completed vocational training	3 children	Unemployed	Yes	12-15	Few months	Few months, 6-7 households	Yes
Tharushi	30	Sri Lanka	Female	Bachelors degree	None	Student	Yes	~12	Few months	Few months, 1 household	Yes
Chamari	34	Sri Lanka	Female	Masters degree	1 child	Student	Yes	15-20	Few months	Few months, 6 households	Yes
Jelena	36	Serbia	Female	Completed vocational training	3 children	Full-time employee	Yes	~20	14 years	12 years, >100 households	Yes
Parshavi	22	Nepal	Female	Bachelors degree	None	Student, part-time employee	Yes	10-12	Few months	Few months, 3 households	Yes

Table 4: Sample

Note: All names have been pseudonymised

Five of the seven workers are students, two are part-time employees, one is a full-time employee and one is unemployed. However, all the workers interviewed work illegally via the platform, some in addition to their regular employment. One of the workers works between 35 to 45 hours per week via the [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) and has two employment contracts over eight hours per week, respectively, with the rest of the weekly working hours being undeclared. Another worker reported having a part-time employment contract in prospect. All others perform solely undeclared work mediated through the platform. Working times at [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) range between one hour per week for one of the newcomers and 35 to 45 hours per week for the aforementioned experienced worker.

Five of the interviewed workers prefer undeclared work over employment because of higher net income and instant reception of income. This not only has to do with mere preferences, however, as some of the workers mentioned. Another important reason for the prevalence of undeclared work is a legal regulation in Austria that allows non-EU students working in Austria to work a maximum of 20 hours per week. In domestic cleaning, this is not enough to live a decent life in Vienna. Therefore, to earn a living wage and avoid further legal hurdles, non-EU students working via this platform do undeclared work (in addition to regular work). One worker also reported not knowing about her legal status and legal requirements for regular work in Austria. Another worker reported using her account to mediate jobs to her sister who sometimes commutes to Austria but is not legally allowed to work in Austria. High levels of undeclared work are not uncommon in platform work. Research so far suggests that many DLPs are active in sectors where undeclared work is prevalent, such as cleaning, repair or babysitting, indicating the likely possibility “that platform work exacerbates undeclared work in the EU” (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 93). The case study by Wiesböck et al. (2023) of two domestic work platforms in Vienna including [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) also found the majority of the fifteen participants to engage in undeclared work.

The workers in my sample have high levels of education: six hold university degrees and two have completed vocational training. Three workers have children. In terms of work experience with the platform, two interviewees work via the platform for many years (five and twelve years, respectively) and have worked for more than a hundred households. These workers moved to Vienna many years ago. The rest of the sample moved to Vienna recently, started working via the platform a few months ago and worked for between one and ten clients so far. Hourly pay, as stated by the interviewees, is most of the time determined by the clients and ranges between ten to twenty euros per hour. For comparison, the gross hourly wage for a

cleaner regulated by collective agreement is between €12 and €14.47 since January 1, 2025, depending on qualifications and field of activity (Wirtschaftskammer Österreich, 2025).

The four workers from Sri Lanka all receive financial support by family or spouses. Two have a second job outside the platform and only one of the interviewed workers depends on the income generated via the platform alone. Concerning job history, all participants have previous work experience. In the Sri Lankan group, they have between six and thirteen years of work experience in government agencies in Sri Lanka. The others have previous work experience in domestic work, but also in gastronomy and retail.

Relevant similarities and differences concern the socioeconomic positioning of the workers and the length and depth of their experience in using the platform: The workers from Sri Lanka are well educated, have many years of work experience in sometimes high-level positions in government agencies, and are relatively independent of income from platform work, as their living expenses are (at least currently) covered by financial support. They do this work to become more financially independent in the long term, to earn some extra money, and to gain work experience in Austria. The second group is in a more precarious position: despite their other income, they are dependent on the income from platform work to support themselves and their families. Some of them work many hours a week on the platform, in addition to their regular employment.

In terms of experience with the platform, a distinction can be made between the five newcomers with a few months of experience and the two workers with many years of experience. Only one of the interviewees is planning a long-term career via the platform. All others see the work as a temporary measure until they find a better job, have their qualifications recognized, or complete their studies.

5.2 Work experiences, working conditions, major challenges and coping mechanisms

This section presents the findings of my research on how workers experience their work, the problems, risks and challenges they face and the ways they deal with these challenges. Furthermore, I explain these findings based on the socio-economic positioning of the workers, the physical and formal context in which the work takes place, workers' previous experiences on the labour market, and broader labour market conditions. The underlying consideration is that these are relevant factors which together lead to the emergence of a specific working experience. A schematic representation of these causal relations is provided by figure 11.

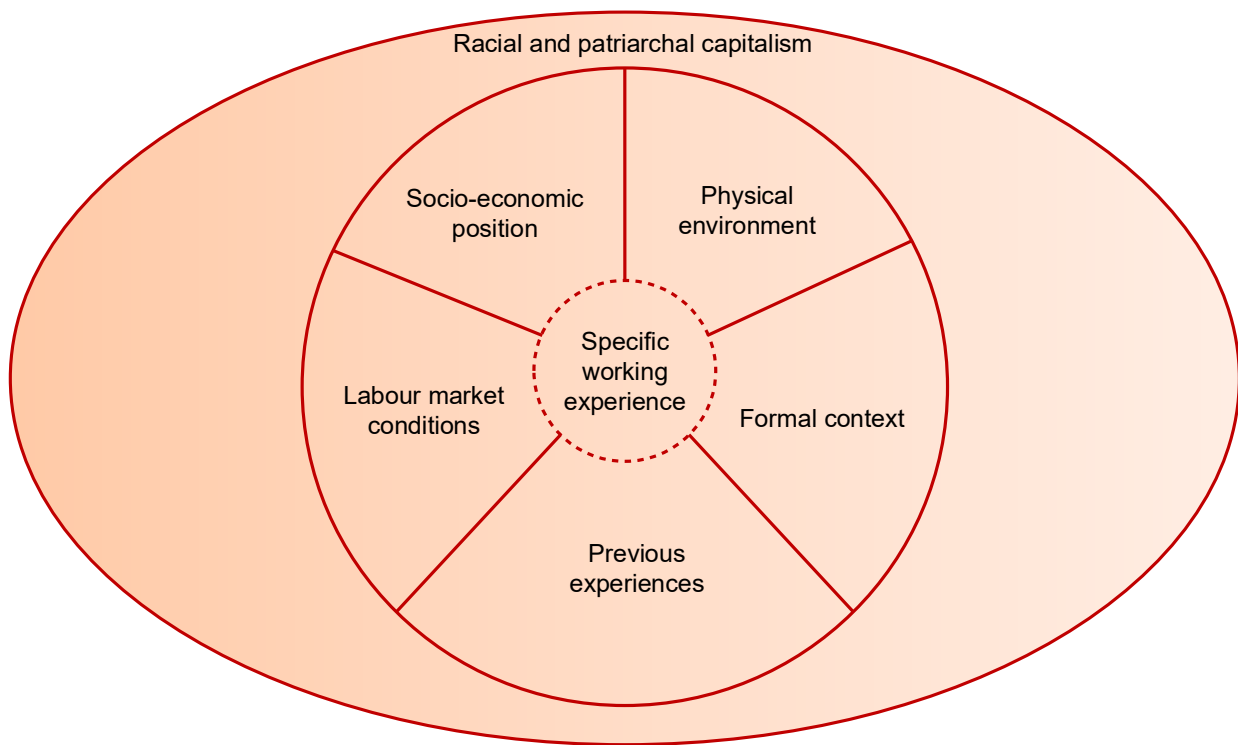


Figure 11: Causal model for specific working experience

The socio-economic position of the worker contains indicators such as gender, care obligations, education, employment status, age and whether a second income exists. It therefore determines to some extent the dependence of the worker on the income generated via the platform. The physical environment denotes physical and spatial factors that characterise the work process. In the case of domestic cleaners, for example, the physical environment is characterised by isolation, working in private homes, having to commute, etc. The formal context captures the rights and duties pertaining to the worker due to their legal status (both in terms of employment and migration) and contractual relations, as well as their scope of action resulting from the platform's infrastructure. Another explanatory variable for working experience I take into consideration are previous experiences on the labour market, including the job history, previous working experiences as well as length and depth of experience with the platform. Finally, labour market conditions concern the availability of alternative jobs and the relationship between the supply of and demand for labour power (including, for instance, reserve army mechanisms resulting from an oversupply of labour power). All these factors are located in the broader context of a racially and patriarchally structured capitalism which includes internalised racist and sexist attitudes among clients.

5.2.1 Lack of protection and vulnerability to (sexual) violence

Both the physical and formal context in which workers operate expose them to enormous risks. Most of the work is done illegally – i.e., with almost no institutional protection – and often takes place alone in the private homes of often completely unknown clients with no protection provided by the platform either. All interviewees report regular sexual harassment both online and on site, as well as other dangerous and traumatic situations that they must deal with individually.

Of the reports of negative customer experiences, *sexual violence* by male clients was mentioned the most, including digital and on-location sexual harassment. This also includes the understanding among some men that they are not just paying for a specific service, but that they are acquiring the whole person along with a whole range of care services (often including sexual services):

Some men think they can just treat women like things. They just throw it into your face and then you have to deal with it ... Some women just ignore it, but I take it very seriously. For me, it is very important that I feel safe, that I am safe (Pooja).

All workers reported receiving transgressing messages regularly, asking in particular for sexual services. Some men also seem to use the platform not to find a domestic service provider at all but rather to make unwanted approaches on female workers:

I'm now getting lots of messages from men – disaster! ... For example, a man wrote to me, 'Hello, can we meet?' I didn't take anyone with me. I thought we were meeting because of work ... but then he wrote me such... such... terrible messages. I told him no. Then I blocked him immediately, but he created a new account. But there's a completely different name in the message! (Jelena, own translation)

The two experienced workers are very used to this kind of behaviour and report it happening regularly. As described in the quote above, male clients sometimes create new accounts to contact them again after being blocked. Workers cannot ensure that people they have previously blocked do not contact them again via a new account with a different name. Similarly, the two interviewees also reported of male clients using pictures of women or families as profile pictures when contacting workers: "Sometimes you see a woman with a child in profile. And then you write to her, and it turns out to be a man who wants to meet up" (Jelena, own translation).

Workers often do not know who their clients are and what kind of situation they are putting themselves in, as they have little information about the customers' households and no way of verifying the information they provide: "When I'm going, I don't know who are in there and

I'm going a bit nervous" (Chamari). Working in an undeclared setting means that workers have no protection by an employer and face obstacles in calling the police as they are working illegally and might face problems themselves. Thus, they are very vulnerable to sexual violence in the homes of their clients as well. Many workers reported men sexually harassing them in their homes, which can lead to trauma and high levels of stress, anxiety and fear. As one worker told me after such an incident: "This was really traumatising, and I was hesitant to use the website again. But you have to survive, right? You have to earn money" (Pooja).

Dismissive and sometimes *disrespectful behaviour* by clients was also reported by all interviewees. For example, some workers experienced customers not showing up at the arranged time, writing bad reviews despite previous cancellation of the appointment by the worker, not paying overtime although the task was too extensive for the given time, or treating workers like inferiors or servants. Some workers also reported potential clients insulting them after declining their unwanted sexual approaches. One worker elaborates: "I went to an address, in an hour. I waited half an hour, then I drove back home. She doesn't have time. But if I drove for half an hour or an hour, it doesn't matter to her" (Jelena, own translation).

Besides sexual harassment and degrading behaviour, physical risk and psychological and emotional strain also result from other forms of harmful behaviour by clients. When entering private homes, workers are sometimes faced with highly intimate situations, involving a high level of exposure to their clients. Many workers, particularly more experienced ones, report having encountered situations where they were confronted with perceived mental illness or exposed to their clients' mood swings. Such experiences also lead to high levels of stress, anxiety and fear. A worker told me about an incident in which the client locked the door behind her shortly after she entered. The house was in an extremely chaotic state, and she suspected that the woman was mentally ill: "I thought about jumping out of the window. I was so scared... I forgot my bag. I left everything behind. I left immediately... Then I imagined that she would come after me" (Jelena, own translation).

All workers also report many positive experiences and supportive behaviour by clients. The problem is, however, that workers have no guarantee and no security to be treated with dignity and respect. Judging from their reported behaviour, some clients seem to view the workers as exploitable and disposable subjects. While sexist attitudes are very prevalent and openly expressed in the messages and actions of some customers, racist and classist attitudes certainly also play a role in justifying low pay and treating workers as a disposable resource.

Workers also reported facing physical strain during work due to a lack of skill in handling chemicals (and not understanding German manuals) and cleaning dangerous areas such as balconies and windows, as well as carrying heavy weights. One worker reported having to work in a household with a cat, despite being allergic to them, because the customer had not mentioned this in the job description.

Both the physical and formal context as well as sexist, racist and classist attitudes among clients can thus be identified as the causes for the vulnerability of the workers to violence, stress and trauma. The formal context also includes the platform's infrastructure, however. The platform does not offer workers the opportunity to report harmful behaviour or share information with each other, nor does it appear to be concerned about sexual content in messages or the protection of workers: "I'm getting lots of messages from men now – it's a disaster! ... I wanted to file a complaint but I couldn't ... No, I can't do anything about it" (Jelena, own translation). All of the interviewees have the impression that the platform does not care at all about the safety, preparation or training of the workers. As one worker put it: "The platform does absolutely nothing for our safety" (Pooja).

Thus, the most common way of dealing with sexual harassment is blocking or ignoring. None of the workers knows about any possibility to report harmful behaviour by clients to the platform – in fact, none of them knows how to contact the platform operators, nor have they received any helpful information, support or instructions from them:

I have no idea how to get in touch with them [the platform operators]. Maybe you can write an email? But then it takes so long time ... I don't know, I've never tried. You just block the people that write bad messages (Pooja).

The five inexperienced workers were even unaware that you could block people, thereby preventing them from contacting you again from the same account. They simply resorted to ignoring them.

These findings are in line with previous research on platform labour, which has found that health and safety risks of certain tasks are aggravated if performed through DLPs because of limited training and instructions on health and safety, absence of an organisational structure, poorer protection and insurance coverage as well as algorithmic control (Fairwork, 2022; Hauben et al., 2020; Kilhoffer et al., 2020). Racist, classist and sexist discrimination, harassment and violence have been found to pose particularly high and severe strains for domestic platform workers, who are generally more vulnerable due to the high prevalence of undeclared work and the subsequent lack of any labour protection (Hauben et al., 2020; Wiesböck et al., 2023). A set of practices incentivised by the platform infrastructure, such as mimicking the design of dating

platforms, leads to ambiguity about the product that is being bought; the service of cleaning, or the person performing the service (and with it additional services like caring, emotional or sexual services) (Strüver & Lentz, 2024).

5.2.2 Lack of protection and vulnerability to overexploitation

Vulnerability to overexploitation also results primarily from the formal context, which is characterized by a lack of institutional protection and standardisation. Since undeclared work accounts for the majority of the work on the platform among the workers interviewed, social protection is virtually non-existent for most of them. Only those who have a second job enjoy social protection through that employment. Due to the often illegal nature of the employment relationship, there are no standards whatsoever with regard to occupational safety, working time restrictions, pay, holidays, etc. This is consistent with the findings of other studies, which found that platform workers in the EU generally have less access to social protection (EC, 2021) and that DLPs are often free-riding on social protection of their workers being provided through an employment relationship outside the platform (Schor et al., 2020).

This lack of standards and protection results in *fluctuating* and *low incomes*, with hourly wages often depending on the willingness of clients, or being a matter of spontaneous negotiations on site:

I have a woman who I worked with for three years in my company and also privately. She pays me 100 euros ... [I said] thank you, I'll come back tomorrow, that's too much. She says no, it's fine. You have people like that too. You also have people who count every penny (Jelena, own translation).

Only one of the interviewed workers reported engaging in negotiations, however. The rest said that they do not feel in a position to negotiate. Although workers can specify the hourly rate for their services on the website, they often accept jobs that pay less. Less experienced workers in particular feel unable to negotiate prices and take almost any job they can get, with customers setting the price:

It depends on how much they want to give us. 11, 12, some people give 10. Depending on the person (Parshavi).

I'm asking, I'm requesting a job and they are giving. Not negotiation (Chamari).

There is some discrepancy in workers' vulnerability to low pay depending on two factors, however: the time the worker already works via the platform (previous experience) and their dependence on the income (socio-economic position). Generally, workers that just started report high transaction costs in finding clients, i.e. many rejections and a lot of unpaid time spent on the platform in order to find a client. Workers that just started and depend on the income report

low autonomy in choosing jobs – they have to take any job they can get, even if it is badly paid and far away. Workers who do not depend on the income are in a better position to reject bad offers. Those workers that have already worked via the platform for many years also report that they had problems finding clients at first. After some time, however, they found clients with whom they were able to build trusted relationships – in some cases employment. With a more secure schedule, thus, they are less dependent on new jobs and in a better position to choose between offers.

But even experienced workers earn rather low wages, with the highest hourly wage in my sample being 20 euros per hour (without any social security coverage). And this figure still does not reflect the real salary. All workers report high, unpaid search costs, long unpaid commuting times, and wage theft. Especially when starting work with the platform, workers spend a lot of time looking for jobs, messaging with people and being constantly available.

Messaging, writing. That is the main thing to do (Sandamali).

I have written so many clients... about, I think, 100. More than 100 (Chamari).

This tendency has also been identified in the literature on platform work in the EU. Compared to their non-platform counterparts, in addition to the service they are paid for, platform workers have been found to engage in “constant customer care and public relations” (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 62; Wiesböck et al., 2024). Factors such as lack of minimum wage settings, collective agreement coverage and bargaining power, changes in the prices set by platforms or clients (dynamic pricing), lack of demand, payment by piece rate, unpaid working time and additional work-related costs are found to be commonalities across different types of platform work. Low pay and low income security are thus not unique features of the participants in my study, but general characteristics of platform work (Eurofound, 2018; Fairwork, 2022; Hauben et al., 2020; Kilhoffer et al., 2020).

All the newcomers reported struggling with finding enough work and having to deal with *irregular and fluctuating working times* that sometimes change at the will of the client. At least for newcomers who depend on the income generated via the platform, we can speak of a “fissured” working day that consists of constantly checking and writing messages, flexibly reacting to the demands of clients and shifting appointments accordingly, and commuting between different work locations in the city area, without a clear boundary between working hours and leisure time – including working on weekends, which was reported by all interviewees. Again, this is consistent with previous finding that show platform workers at risk of blurring the boundaries between leisure time and working time, constant availability as well as long, unpredictable and unsocial working hours (Hauben et al., 2020; Piasna, 2024; Weil,

2017). The European Commission (2021) found that platform workers in the EU across different industries spend more than a third of their working time with unpaid tasks.

As with pay, my interview sample showed that the reliability and regularity of working hours improves over time on the platform, and that the proportion of paid working hours in relation to total working hours (including search costs) also increases over time. While inexperienced workers have very irregular working hours and high search costs, experienced workers established customers with regular working hours and only some additional fluctuating clientele. The more experienced workers also reported a higher degree of flexibility. With regular customers and a secured income, sometimes including the keys to their homes, they can manage working time more flexibly according to their wishes: “I can do my trading, sports and studies whenever I want” (Pooja). In these cases, the platform has provided them access to customers that they now interact with entirely outside of the platform’s infrastructure. Whereas newcomers are dependent on the platform and have to spend many hours looking for jobs, the more experienced workers use the platform rather occasionally to do some extra hours if they find the time or need additional money. Still, unreliable working times also affect – albeit to a lesser extent – experienced workers: “It always varies ... sometimes I have work every day for two weeks ... Sometimes I have no work for a week” (Jelena, own translation).

Long *unpaid commuting times* remain an issue for all workers, too. For example, one worker elaborated that she has one job where she is paid for four hours and has to commute around 45-60 minutes one-way. Thus, of up to six hours of work related activities, only four are paid with a payment of 15 euros per hour.

The majority of the interviewed workers (five out of seven) reported speed pressure being an issue during their work. *High work intensity and speed pressure* result from having to commute between places and from clients making unrealistic and misleading offers that plan too little time for too large areas. This leads to workers being in the awkward position of either not finishing a task, or working more hours, which are often unpaid. All the inexperienced workers who reported speed pressure did not feel in a position to demand pay for their “overtime”:

There are two rooms, one living area and the kitchen, WC also is there. Within one hour it's not possible to clean ... I didn't want to negotiate, it's my fault, yes. It's my fault to spend one and a half hour (Tharushi).

All workers also report instances of *wage theft*, either because clients simply did not pay them (because of some supposed mistake they made), clients not paying for overtime or workers having to leave the place because they feel in danger.

Thus, the formal context, being characterized by a lack of institutional protection and standardisation, the socio-economic position of the workers, who often do not feel in a position to negotiate with clients, as well as high inter-worker competition for jobs make them vulnerable to overexploitation. This results in all workers in my sample being affected by overexploitation and – if we extrapolate the results by assuming that the formal context and socio-economic position of the other workers does not differ significantly – systematic overexploitation of the platform workers. Indeed, this finding does not appear to be an isolated case. Previous research has shown that reserve army mechanisms stemming from high competition, a constant threat of replaceability and income insecurity negatively affect worker autonomy in the allocation of tasks (Kilhoffer et al., 2020), increase work intensity and speed pressure (EC, 2021; Hauben et al., 2020), and are shown to be particularly relevant in the case of household work (Strüver & Lentz, 2024; Wiesböck et al., 2023).

5.2.3 Renegotiating roles

In her autoethnographic fieldwork on a digital platform for cleaners, Keller (2022) found that unclear task definitions and sudden demands for additional services on site lead to domestic workers having to constantly renegotiate power relations between themselves, customers and the platform. These often work to the detriment of workers who find themselves unable to say no in such an intimate and trusted setting. Renegotiating their role in terms of their relationship with the customer, the kinds of services to be done and the pay are, indeed, also reported by all the participants in my study.

All of the interviewed workers complain about false or *misleading job descriptions*. When clients post a job offer on the platform, the platform does not install any measures to ensure or incentivise truthfulness, or provide mechanisms to sanction false description. As there are most of the time no formal contracts or binding agreements with clients, workers are sometimes faced with larger areas to clean than expected, or lower pay than stated. Once in the place, many do not feel in a position to decline or renegotiate the terms of the job.

Relationships of trust with their clients are characteristic of this type of work. Such relationships can lead to workers not feeling in a position to negotiate higher pay. Intimate relationships also complicate setting strict boundaries to working time and the kinds of tasks performed. Trust can also turn out to be a pitfall. For example, one worker reported that she no longer accepts keys to clients' homes, because she had once been wrongly accused of stealing: "If I have keys, if something happens, if something is missing from the apartment, then it's my fault" (Jelena, own translation).

Lack of instructions and training is also reported by the participants in my sample to be a source of renegotiating one's role with regard to the customer, at least at the start of working via the platform. The platform does not provide any trainings – anyone with a work permit can register and start working as soon as they find a job. Little to no access to co-sponsored training and skill development opportunities and limited career opportunities are also a general observation within the platform economy in the EU (EC, 2021; Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna, 2024). DLPs avoid such measures to not complicate their role as non-employer.

All interviewees, therefore, either had previous experiences in domestic work or found ways to acquire the skills they needed to perform their tasks by themselves. Many workers (four out of seven) also report making mistakes in the beginning, being confronted with challenging situations and sometimes receiving instructions from clients: “They [the customers] told me. Because we don't know how to handle the machines” (Niroshi). The majority of the workers already had some experience in domestic work. Others, who have no experience, received tips by co-workers, by observing other workers, or by educating themselves: “One of my friends already came last year and he instructed me ... one day before I already prepared myself through the video – YouTube or ChatGPT” (Tharushi). An obstacle for migrant workers, particularly those who do not know German, is that tools, items and chemicals are often different from what workers are used to from their countries of origin, and manuals are often in German only.

The two more experienced workers reported that they learned a lot during their years, both in terms of how to perform their tasks efficiently and thoroughly as well as how to deal with customers and handle dangerous situations. All the workers I interviewed agreed that sharing information, experiences and knowledge would be helpful, and that many mistakes could be prevented through knowledge exchange.

On a more general level, cultural differences, loneliness, and feeling overwhelmed by the new environment characterise the experience of some migrant workers. Part of the *migration experience* may include a change in identity in terms of class affiliation. All workers who have migrated from Sri Lanka are wealthy in their home country, already highly educated, and have years of experience in high-skilled jobs. For them, it is very challenging to deal with the new social position they are forced into and the discrimination they are faced with: “In Sri Lanka, most of the employees have called me as Madam. And in here, I'm just like a regular. I'm so fed up” (Tharushi).

In summary, the lack of standardisation of services and institutional protection in the formal context, as well as the physical context of a new environment and the nature of the work, which

often require trust relationships between workers and clients, regularly lead to workers having to renegotiate their roles with regard to themselves, the clients and the platform. Finding oneself overwhelmed with the new environment and sometimes in a precarious socio-economic position, such renegotiations generally reinforce the tendency toward overexploitation of platform workers.

5.2.4 Information asymmetry, data protection and arbitrary disciplining measures

Many interviewed workers (four out of seven), and particularly the two more experienced ones in my sample, complained that *unfair customer ratings* were an issue for their work on the platform. As they emphasised, the problem lies in the fact that the platform only allows one party – the customer – to review the other, which leads to an extremely unequal distribution of both information and power. Almost all workers, especially experienced ones, emphasise the importance of customer ratings for their job prospects. Customers can rate workers after having chatted with them, even if the worker has not performed any task. Workers can reply to ratings but one experienced worker assured me that this does not matter much for future customers: “Even when I have many people writing, ‘she is good, she is very good’ – still, this [one bad] review and it’s over” (Jelena, own translation). Thus, customers have the power to exchange information about workers and to significantly influence their prospects of future jobs, while workers are isolated and have no possibility to share information on customers. For example, one worker reported having cancelled an appointment in advance, but still received a bad review by the client. Another worker felt unsafe because of harmful behaviour of a client and left the place immediately to protect herself. She received a bad review from the client and had no possibility to warn other workers about the possibly dangerous client: “You can do nothing. They have the power to review us and we have no power to review them. It is... Einbahnstraße [one-way street]” (Pooja).

The resulting *information asymmetry* clearly benefits the client, who enjoys anonymity even in cases of harmful behaviour, and disadvantages the worker, who can only access information about their clients that is provided by the clients themselves. Asymmetric access to information is reinforced by high inter-worker competition and the resulting need for workers to make personal information openly accessible to everyone to increase their chances of getting a job. Thus, almost all workers on the platform have a profile picture of themselves, many include testimonials and some publicly display their CVs. Some interviewed workers also report revealing their place of birth, age, and reason for migration in text messages after being asked

by clients. Clients, on the other hand, rarely provide personal information or a profile picture of themselves.

In the literature, data protection is identified as a challenge for platform workers in the EU with regard to algorithmic management (Do et al., 2024). Although none of the interviewees regard it as such, *data protection* is an issue also for the workers in my sample, albeit not due to algorithmic management. The workers do not problematise privacy concerns as they anticipate that clients will want to know who enters their home. Only one of the experienced workers demands documents from her clients in return to be able to identify them in case of mistreatment. The imbalance between supply and demand, between the number of workers and the number of jobs, leads to a very unequal exchange in information. It necessitates workers to disclose a lot of personal information to strangers while, in most cases, giving clients the privilege of anonymity – despite the fact that workers expose themselves to a significantly higher risk by entering a stranger’s home unprotected.

The causes for information asymmetries, invasion of privacy and arbitrary disciplining measures by clients are thus, firstly, the rules of the platform, which allow clients to review workers and not vice-versa. Secondly, the lack of protection of customers ensuring against theft and damage that necessitates workers to disclose private information to customers to build trust. And, lastly, reserve army mechanisms that create pressure to share personal information to outcompete other workers.

5.2.5 Coping mechanisms

It has become evident that platform workers on *haushaltshilfe*²⁴ lack most of the institutionalised safeguards that protect labour from commodification and workers from overexploitation and violence. Neither state institutions nor organised labour or “good governance” by the platform are in place to protect them. Faced with such vulnerability, workers find their own ways to deal with these challenges and, in some cases, improve their safety and working conditions.

Regarding individual protective measures against (sexual) violence and harmful behaviour, the most common forms are *exiting* and *ignoring*. Exiting is achieved by leaving the place, blocking people on the website and on the phone, or deleting the account after having received bad reviews and creating a new one:

I just said, I’m sorry, but if you hit dogs, I don’t want to go in. And he gave me bad review on the [platform]. So, I can only delete profile. Because I’ve had such a bad experience when someone

writes, ah, she's no good, she won't come to work – delete it immediately is the only option for me.

It's bad for me, but not for him (Jelena, own translation).

The inexperienced workers in my sample reported that they did not even know they could block a person and resorted to just not answering to them. Some workers with friends also working on the platform reported *working together* on their first job at a stranger's house. Others *informed relatives or friends* about the place and time of their job or *stopped texting with single men* altogether and only considering offers by women, couples and families. One worker stated that she *exchanges identification documents* with new clients before visiting them to counteract information asymmetries. She also *visits them before starting a work relationship* to check whether she feels safe in the household. The experienced workers report of constantly learning from each negative experiencing and adapting their behaviour to protect themselves: “I have so much experience, now I know how to do these things. In the beginning I made many mistakes” (Pooja).

Concerning overexploitation, the more experienced workers learned to *set thresholds* on distance, size of the area and payment to prevent low pay and overtime. They *communicate strict boundaries* on working times and availability to their clients to ensure at least some separation between work and leisure time. To a certain extent, my sample also reveals a difference in how experienced and less experienced workers deal with excessive exploitation. While the experienced workers have developed a certain *strictness* and clear ideas about what their tasks are and what constitutes “justified” demands, at least some of the less experienced workers tend to *blame themselves*:

Because of my attitude and my ego. Especially Sri Lankans ... I love that people. But my ego is something disturbing me (Sandamali).

It's my fault, it's my fault to spend one and a half hour to do my job. Yeah, I think so, that's my fault.

Next time I'm trying to finish my work within one hour (Tharushi).

Some workers report coping with lack of instructions, training and skills by *observing co-workers*, *asking co-workers* from the same migrant community for tips and instructions, or *educating themselves* through YouTube videos and ChatGPT. Generally, those interviewees who know other people working on the platform as well *share experiences* with them: “We discuss every day, every minute. We share everything” (Sandamali). Some workers also reported *lying about their work experience* to increase their chances of getting a job, thus using the lack of accountability towards the platform to their advantage.

Clearly, none of these coping mechanisms comes close to guaranteeing safety against violence, overexploitation and unfair treatment, and there are clear limits to their effectiveness.

In addition to the legal vulnerability resulting from illegal employment, the sometimes precarious socioeconomic position, and the physical working environment, it is particularly the rules of the platform that prevent more effective forms of workers protecting themselves – often leaving workers no choice but to enter a home and do their job even if they find themselves in a dangerous situation. For example, no worker knew about any mechanisms to complain about clients to the platform hosts or to exchange information among workers: “I wanted to report a complaint, but I can’t. That’s a bit ... catastrophic” (Jelena, own translation). There seem to be no effective means of preventing potential clients from harmful messages or effective identity checks for clients installed on the platform. There is also no possibility to rate customers or to effectively rebut their bad ratings. In addition to all this, the prevalence of undeclared work means that workers have close to no institutional protection and are sometimes hesitant or afraid to engage with the police. Thus, many workers simply accept the risk of potentially violent encounters, the low pay, unpaid overtime, and high search and travel costs.

All in all, the platform’s design creates an extremely uneven playing field, with potential clients in a far more powerful position than workers, who are often dependent on the work due to external life circumstances. While workers must reveal a great deal about themselves to increase their chances of getting jobs and are constantly exposed to sometimes unfair customer reviews without any effective means to challenge them, clients hardly have to disclose any personal information and can behave violently, unfairly, and arbitrarily toward workers without fear of negative consequences.

5.2.6 Synopsis: Job satisfaction under conditions of labour market discrimination

Overall, every worker judges the platform positively. Most of them value the platform for it providing easy access to jobs – an experience that none of them has made on the labour market where they face a lot of barriers: “But it is very good that the platform exists. I have also a lot of good experiences. I would say 70% is good, 30% is bad” (Pooja). One worker also mentions the compatibility of children and work as a positive aspect about the platform. These overall positive evaluations notwithstanding, only one of the interviewed workers plans to keep working via the platform in the longer term. Because she earns more through her undeclared work mediated via the platform than in her regular full-time job, she is considering quitting her job and starting a business on her own. This would also mean, however, losing access to social protection that is now provided through her regular employment. The rest, six out of seven interviewed workers, regard their work via the platform as an interim measure until they find a better job with regular employment and are planning a career outside the platform.

When analysing the reasons for starting the work, differing work experiences and job satisfaction, it is crucial to differentiate between two groups among the interviewed workers. The group of Sri Lankan workers have a second source of income that guarantees a decent living standard. They have savings, receive sufficient support from their country of origin, or have income from their spouses. They perform this work to gain work experience in Austria, generate additional income, and because they could not find better jobs.

In fact, most of the interviewed workers applied for other jobs but got rejected. The newcomers often state that lack of German and lack of working experience in Austria as reasons for their failure to get another job. One of the more experienced workers started working via the platform due to a lack of job opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The other group of workers depends on the income generated through their work via the platform to pay for their living expenses. Not having enough money to pay for your family's or your own living costs is a real threat to them. As one of the workers summarised in a nutshell: "it [the platform] is good because if we do not do a job, we will be homeless here" (Parshavi). Rising costs of living are also mentioned as a reason for taking up their work on the platform.

Despite the differences between these two groups, there are also commonalities among all the workers interviewed. All the interviewed workers face discrimination on the labour market due to immigration law. The language barrier is very often cited as a reason for failure in the labour market. Six of the seven workers interviewed do not speak German and report that knowledge of German is often required or desirable. However, many also mention the lack of or pending recognition of education, training, and work experience abroad. All the Sri Lankan workers are highly educated and already have many years of experience in high-skilled jobs, some of them having held high positions in government agencies. Still, being a migrant from a non-EU country, they cannot find jobs in Vienna. All of them complain about being very frustrated with this situation: "I have felt a big difference in my mind. In Sri Lanka and Vienna, I mean, terrible experience. Actually, I don't express in words" (Sandamali).

In addition, non-EU students are legally only allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours per week, which limits their choice of professions and is usually not enough to cover their living expenses in Vienna. One worker also reports labour market discrimination because she has three children: "With three children, I can't find a proper job because no matter where I go, they always say, 'Yes, you have children, you don't have time, it won't work'" (Jelena, own translation). In this light, the platform's low threshold to finding work and the possibility to

earn more than a part-time salary through undeclared work appear particularly attractive and, in many cases, necessary.

In addition to labour market discrimination, experiences in previous jobs also play a major role in how workers evaluate their work on the platform. The reports of those interviewees who have lived in Vienna for a long time are particularly relevant here. One of them does not earn enough money in her full-time job to support her family, so she has to additionally work via the platform. However, she made experiences of harmful behaviour by colleagues and customers in her full-time job as a professional cleaner as well: “Yes, I think it’s the same everywhere. At work, in the company, it’s the same. With employees, colleagues, not everyone can be good” (Jelena, own translation). The other experienced worker also has made experiences of sexual harassment, exploitation, low earnings and bad working conditions in previous jobs. She told me that when she arrived in Vienna, she started working in a restaurant, earning six to seven euros per hour. However, the restaurant owner took advantage of her situation as a young migrant woman who had just arrived in a foreign country and needed an income. He didn’t give her an employment contract, didn’t pay her for the first two months and sexually harassed her, so she quit. In her next job as a cleaner, she earned seven to eight euros per hour. Having had these experiences in previous jobs, she is much happier with the work she does through the platform. The risk of sexual violence is omnipresent, but: “I feel like it’s everywhere, men taking advantage of women being alone in this country ... Bad things happen everywhere” (Pooja).

Judging from the experiences of the workers in my sample, domestic services mediated via [haushaltshilfe24.at](#) can be regarded as being part of a care fix. As I laid out, demand for care services (in this case cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping and the like) of some are satisfied through the provision of cheap and unprotected labour by others who lack alternatives. Thus, we can witness a relocation of care gaps onto the providers of such services. This is not sustainable in the long run, as it exposes care service providers to risks pertaining to health, (old age) poverty, and harm and trauma, all due to a lack of protection. These risks are only mitigated by the fact that most workers in my sample intend to do the work only temporarily. However, this does not apply to everyone, and even during this period, damage (trauma, illness) can occur that would necessitate additional care services for the workers.

Processes of feminisation are clearly observable as well. Being made extremely vulnerable to overexploitation and (sexual) violence characterises the cleaners’ work reality – due to both general living conditions, discrimination on the labour market and the platform’s design that prioritises the safety of clients over those of workers. This vulnerability is clearly also due to a

societal conception of femininity that constructs women as caregivers and the female body as a sexual resource. As already described in detail, all female workers report being constantly asked for sexual services by male customers. The platform does nothing to prevent this sexualisation of cleaners. Processes of racialisation also play an important role in creating an exploitable workforce. They manifest in exclusionary immigration policies that limit non-EU citizens' access to the labour market and entitlements to social services. Due to their origin, these policies force migrant workers into precarious, often illegal employment.

The DLP takes advantage of this situation of extreme vulnerability and dependence on generating income through selling one's labour power by providing relatively easy access to jobs. Due to lack of training and skill development, platform workers in general and migrant platform workers in particular – who often regard platform work as a stepping stone to better employment opportunities – have been found to be at heightened risk of deskilling, being stuck in precarious and frustrating work, and accumulating labour market disadvantage (van Doorn & Vijay, 2024). In my sample, six out of seven workers were studying and pursued careers outside the platform, so the risk of being stuck can be considered low. This is due to individual choices, however, and not due to the platform work offering great opportunities. For one worker in my sample, the platform did indeed offer an opportunity for a career by providing the opportunity to build her own customer base, independent of the platform or a cleaning company. Nonetheless, it was only an attractive option because the pay for undeclared work is higher than the low wages in the regular cleaning sector. The attractiveness therefore stems from the comparatively poorer alternative and comes at the expense of social protection. A career in undeclared work means an extremely high occupational risk and a risk of poverty in old age.

I would therefore conclude that *haushaltshilfe24.at* can be said to engage in predatory inclusion, as they generate profit by taking advantage of precarised populations and do not provide protection or opportunities for workers to accumulate human capital. Thus, workers either look for protection and career development outside the platform, or they risk severe harm, poverty in old age and poverty in the event of occupational disability, as they are not entitled to public social services.

5.3 Worker power in the platform economy

The following section discusses obstacles and opportunities for worker power in the platform economy based on expert interviews with trade unionists and labour activists in platform mediated food delivery and 24-hour care, policy makers deeply involved in the EUPWD legislative process and researchers from the trade union-affiliated research institute ETUI.

Based on the particular working conditions of platform mediated cleaners, I also discuss which of these obstacles and opportunities apply to them and what new obstacles and opportunities for their worker power exist.

5.3.1 Structural power

Structural power results from the power of workers to withdraw their labour power from the production process, either by refraining from or exiting a contractual relationship (marketplace bargaining power) or by going on strike within contractual relationships (workplace bargaining power).

Concerning marketplace bargaining power, evidence from previous research suggests that most platform workers have little market bargaining power (Kilhoffer et al., 2020). High competition between workers, low entry barriers and work fissuring increase the *replaceability of workers* and thus reduce the effectiveness of the threat of withdrawing their labour force through exiting. At the same time, many platform workers live in precarious circumstances and experience severe labour market discrimination, making them more *dependent* on the income from DLPs and foreclosing the possibility of labour force withdrawal (Piasna, 2024). The findings from my sample are consistent with these observations. Based on the insights from the previous section, we can infer that marketplace bargaining power is very low for the cleaners in my sample. This is largely due to structural discrimination, which is likely to affect other workers on the platform too. Marketplace bargaining power is decreased by language barriers, legal limits to working time due to migrant status, bureaucratic hurdles for receiving a work permit or leaving the country and pending recognition of qualification. All of these factors reduce the availability of alternative jobs. At the same time, many workers face the pressure to earn money due to precarious living conditions, care obligations, low income in other jobs and lack of social support.

Thus, extending accessibility of social services, improving working standards and wages on the broader labour market, improving accessibility of jobs to migrants by streamlining recognition of qualifications, dismantling barriers and labour market discrimination, and reducing unemployment are all strategic goals that would also affect working conditions on labour platforms by counteracting reserve army mechanisms. In turn, this would have a positive effect on marketplace bargaining power.

Workplace bargaining power strongly depends on the ability of workers to collectively organise and thus coincides largely with associational power. Collective action in the form of strikes and protests is quite common among platform workers, especially in the location-based platform

sectors transportation and food delivery (Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Vandaele et al., 2024). The “Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest” documents and maps labour protests by platform workers globally. It shows low pay to be the most common cause of such protests, followed by conflicts around employment status (Piasna, Zwysen, & ILO, 2022).

Employment status is also one of the obstacles to effective collective action. In the food delivery sector, the problem lies in the independent contractor status of the workers. Although mobilisation for strikes – or rather, demonstrations – in the food delivery sector is sometimes relatively successful, they are not that effective since most people are not employed. This means that most people simply stop working temporarily – as they have no legal obligation to work, they are not technically on strike; they are simply not working. Thus, mobilisers rely largely on the self-employed (or illegally employed) to disrupt the production process and put pressure on management. Furthermore, strikes are often used to negotiate higher wages and better conditions in collective agreements. Collective agreements, however, only apply to employees. Thus, motivation of independent contractors to join strikes around these issues can be low.

Undeclared work poses further challenges for collective action. In Brussels, for example, many undocumented migrants work as riders and the authorities know about this. If riders gather to make demands collectively, there is the risk of government repression against undocumented workers. As one activist told me:

That’s why when I fight outside of the House of Rider for people who want to be regulated, I don’t include the rider ... Because we don’t want to put the rider in the light in case they are ... undocumented (Camille Peteers).

Another frequently cited obstacle for platform workers’ workplace bargaining power, albeit to varying degrees, results from *competition between workers* and *isolation*, which impede solidarity and complicate the coordination of collective action. Although this problem affects all platform workers, it is even more serious for cleaners due to the physical environment in which they work. While riders at least see and meet each other on the streets and have places where they spend time because of their work, this is not the case for cleaners. Thus, platform mediated domestic cleaners have not yet formed any association to pool resources and represent interests collectively. They are not only dispersed and isolated inside the households of their clients but most of them also work illegally. *Intimate relationships* to clients that are often accompanying care work further complicate the ability to withdraw one’s labour force within a contractual relationship. In a word, for domestic cleaners, mobilising for a coordinated strike is out of question at present. Because of their work environment, it is highly doubtful whether going on strike is a suitable form of collective action for domestic workers in general. 24-hour

caregivers, for example, who work under somewhat comparable conditions regarding working in isolation in the homes of their clients, have formed an interest group, called IG24. Because both going on strike or mobilising large numbers of workers in person are not feasible, they sometimes use other, more symbolic forms of protest. For one action, for example, they collected photos of workers in solidarity who were unable to physically participate in a protest due to their caregiving responsibilities or current residence status and placed them in front of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Workplace bargaining power for cleaners can thus be considered very low: “You really have no power. You are not in a position to do anything really. Only try to protect yourself“ (Pooja). Reserve army mechanisms resulting from high inter-worker competition and precarious living conditions reduce bargaining power. Under conditions of oversupply of labour, isolation and undeclared work it is very easy for a client to get rid of a worker and replace them with a new one. In fact, such behaviour was reported to me by one of the interviewees. *Lack of training and experience* also reduce workplace bargaining power. The feeling of not being qualified and the overwhelming task of regularly renegotiating one’s own role in relation to the clients’ requirements have a negative impact on the perceived negotiating position. This feeling is also reinforced by the *experience of migration*. Workers who are relatively new to Austria are not yet familiar with labour standards and labour rights and feel less able to negotiate. Experiences of discrimination, migration and adapting to a new environment can also lead to some people not wanting to stand out and simply wanting to do their job.

5.3.2 Associational power

Associational power accrues when workers unite and organise collectively. As mentioned above, platform mediated cleaners have not established any association based on their work. Therefore, in this section, I will discuss insights from previous research and interviews with activists from other sectors, as well as lessons that could be applicable to domestic cleaners.

Research shows that “most platform workers are not organised or represented, nor are they covered by collective agreements” (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 84; see also Hauben et al., 2020). In a representative survey in 14 European countries, Vandaele et al. (2024) found union density among platform workers to stand at 13.4 percent – considerably lower than the average level of union membership in the EU of 23 per cent. Moreover, this “platform unionism” exists merely by coincidence, as “union membership is most likely rooted in the labour market status of platform workers in the conventional economy” (Vandaele et al., 2024, p. 1). There is also a number of bottom-up initiatives, often cooperating with trade unions, however, such as the

Riders Collective in Austria, *Collectif des coursier-e-s* and *La Maison des Livreurs* in Belgium and France and *Liefern am Limit* in Germany.

Notwithstanding the activity of platform workers in collective action, there are several obstacles complicating the effectiveness of this approach. Of utmost importance is the issue of *employment status*. As only employed workers are covered by labour rights, including rights regarding collective bargaining, self-employed workers or independent contractors face legal hurdles in collectivising efforts. Competition law such as antitrust laws targeting price-setting behaviour can apply when self-employed workers try to negotiate over pay collectively. EU law is not necessarily contradicting the self-employed to reach collective agreements with the platforms, however. First, they might be falsely classified as self-employed. According to the Court of Justice of the EU, bogus self-employed are to be treated like employees (Kilhoffer et al., 2020). Second, even for genuinely self-employed, certain agreements like data protection or transparency requirements are not in conflict with competition law. European case law is therefore somewhat ambiguous when it comes to the collective bargaining rights of the self-employed (EC, 2022). But even in countries where they are allowed to join unions (such as Austria), employer's associations rather than unions are their legal representatives in social dialogue. Thus, they often lack proper representation and support, as the bodies responsible for this task also represent the DLPs.

DLPs are also known to resist union efforts and engage in *union busting* (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021; Piasna, 2024). DLPs refute the role of employer and “have been very reluctant to join existing industry and employer associations” (Piasna, 2024, p. 4), leaving unions without a counterpart to negotiate with. DLPs also sometimes refuse to interact with worker representatives and to engage in social dialogue. DLPs spreading misinformation is judged by one activist from the food delivery sector as one the main obstacles to collectivising efforts. Misleading or false information includes false attributions regarding the activities, goals and intentions of the union. For example, a food delivery platform in Vienna spread the rumour that the union wanted to deprive workers of the opportunity to work flexibly. This is closely related to the misinformation DLPs spread concerning the characteristics of different employment statuses: “They really put campaigns, they put mails to really influence the riders, to strengthen this message of, ‘When you are employed, you cannot have flexibility anymore’ – which is not true” (trade unionist). The same problem exists for 24-hour caregivers, who work entirely as self-employed workers despite extreme dependence on both intermediating agencies and clients: “They say that self-employment is advantageous because caregivers can choose their own clients, but in practice this is not true. This flexibility does not exist at all” (labour activist,

IG24, own translation). Other reported practices of union busting include mobbing of workers who are involved in the works council or trade union, constantly changing work processes, so that workers' specific demands must also be constantly adapted making it harder to mobilise, and intimidating workers: „And then there's the fear. Because what we do see is also the disconnection of people who do organize ... you're not firing people, you're just not hiring them again" (Wouter Zwysen).

Although many bottom-up initiatives, at least in the food delivery sector, are part of trade unions and have access to their resources, labour activists name *lack of resources* as a significant challenge in their work. Activist work remains largely unpaid: "Financing is always challenging, and that we are combating precariousness with precariousness ... because I work a lot with volunteers and activists, who I simply cannot overstretch" (Robert Walasinski, own translation).

Another set of barriers to collective action results from the working conditions of platform workers, who often work in *isolation* and geographically dispersed, have *fissured working realities* and *short tenures*, and face *language and cultural barriers* (Do et al., 2024; EC, 2021; Geyer & Prinz, 2022; Piasna, Zwysen, & ILO, 2022; Vandaele et al., 2024). These conditions also characterise the working realities of platform mediated cleaners. The resulting anonymity and "hyper-individualisation" (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021) is detrimental to collectivising efforts and worker solidarity. This tendency is exploited and nourished by DLPs, who incentivise *inter-worker competition* (through replaceability and algorithmic management) and self-disciplining behaviour in the promotion of "micro-entrepreneurship" and an entrepreneurial self (Piasna, 2024; Vandaele et al., 2024; Wiesböck et al., 2024). *High turnover and low commitment* of workers is also reported by labour activists as an obstacle for collectivising efforts: "Any network we build, or any connections we establish, will probably be gone in six months, and you'll have to start all over again" (Robert Walasinski, own translation). As we have seen in the characterisation of the cleaners, high turnover is also prevalent on cleaning platforms – at least in my sample, where only one of seven workers was planning a career based on their work via the platform. Inter-worker competition, too, is an issue for cleaners, as demonstrated by the many rejections that especially newcomers complain about.

Furthermore, most platforms *lack an organisational structure with functioning communication channels* (with the management and between the workers), furthering the atomisation of the worker (Fairwork, 2024). As we have seen in the previous section, this also applies to haushaltshilfe24.at. Paired with a large share of precarised people within the workforce, the result is a *heterogeneity of workers' respective relationships with platform work* concerning

economic dependence and earnings, which leads to differential problems and dividing lines within the workforce (Do et al., 2024; Fairwork, 2022; Vandaele et al., 2024). A particularly important line of division concerns goals of trade unions and the preferences of many migrant workers. As reported by labour activists, many migrant workers do not want working conditions to change because they fear they will no longer be able to work as much or as flexibly as before. Illegal workers are afraid of being caught, but even registered self-employed workers need enough money to support their families or to document a certain income to the authorities – money that, under existing conditions, they can only earn if they are able to work as much as they want:

They mainly want to be flexible. And in some contexts, this means being able to work as much as they want, for example, people who need to earn a certain income for family reunification or citizenship. For students, it means being able to work as little as they want (Adele Siegl, own translation).

This observation also applies to cleaners, many of whom prefer undeclared work over an employment contract because they earn more, receive the money instantly, and can work more than they are legally allowed to.

Lack of knowledge of their collective rights is also identified as an obstacle both in the literature and by activists, a problem that is possibly aggravated by the large share of migrant workers who are not familiar with the respective legal system (Hauben et al., 2020). It coincides to a certain extent with *lack of trust* in trade unions and labour activists, and *cultural differences*. Sometimes there is mistrust against any official organisation that is associated with state authority due to previous experiences of discrimination: “And of course also the ... people without papers ... they are just afraid of everybody who asks, ‘Who are you? What are you doing?’” (trade unionist). But gender and origin can also play a role: “But also because they think, and this is to some extent understandable, that a white Austrian woman can’t tell them anything about their lives” (Adele Siegl, own translation).

Despite all these impediments to organising platform workers, bottom-up initiatives have sprung up in recent years and trade unions have picked up the topic. Compared to other sectors in platform labour, food delivery is certainly the best organised in Europe, possibly due its size, its visibility, and the shared physical spaces that remain inevitable in the production process and provide sites for mutual exchange. Bottom-up initiatives perform important functions in information and identity formation, demonstrating commonalities between experiences and building trust and solidarity, thereby overcoming some of the obstacles to associational power resources such as isolation and atomisation.

Some success has been achieved in attracting workers, initiating exchange and building trust through *low-threshold and on-the-street spaces and events*. This includes face-to-face interactions with workers, organising community-events, providing amenities such as food and drinks and engaging in small-talk with workers. Both the riders and the caregivers have established such spaces and events:

We are building and maintaining a community ... Because we also want people to get in touch with employee representation institutions and break down barriers. Because we are out there on the streets and not somewhere in an air-conditioned office (Robert Walasinski, own translation).

For the IG24, mobilising people for such events is even harder, however, as workers have little leisure time during their stay in Austria and therefore less energy and motivation to spend their scarce leisure time on activism:

We also organize caregiver cafés ... Again, there is a lot of educational work behind this. The caregivers need to know us well, they need to trust that there are no agencies behind it, that it is simply a protected space ... [But] many people don't like these kinds of meetings (labour activist, IG24, own translation).

Ideally, these locations are relatively central and easily accessible. They provide spaces for workers to exchange experiences, build friendships and receive informational and educational services. Recognising shared experiences and issues, and understanding links between one's individual experience and structural conditions are crucial first steps to activating workers:

We want to show that they are not alone and they can talk to each other of their situation, to get to know each other or meet each other. That way you discover that your situation is similar to the other ... That's the point (Camille Peteers).

Thus, atomisation of workers is to some extent overcome by physical spaces where workers meet that are either created or are necessarily part of their work routine (such as picking up your bag at a garage or waiting in front of a restaurant). For cleaners, however, such spaces have never existed, making isolation an even bigger problem – also due to their working environment inside private households and the lack of exchange with co-workers. Within my interview sample, this was only overcome by the Sri Lankan workers, who know each other via informal, digital networks. The rest of the workers were not part of such a migrant community and therefore did not have any interaction with co-workers. Of the remaining three interviewees, only one worker expressed an interest in connecting with colleagues, but she also mentioned that her negative experiences made it more difficult for her to talk about her work with others: “It was a bit re-traumatising, because you start thinking about all the bad experiences you had and the feelings come up... But silence is not good, you have to speak“ (Pooja). The other two

interviewed did not have any interest in such interaction: “Why would you have to interact with other workers?” (Parshavi)

Concerning the physical work environment, the situation of cleaners is somewhat comparable to that of caregivers and has led the IG24 to resort to social media to communicate with workers and finding new ways of protest. In fact, in all my interviews with labour activists and workers, the *use of digital means* and the *existence of communities*, most of which are structured around language and region of origin, was cited as an important factor in establishing and maintaining the movement and to spread information on events: “In fact, community already exists ... So we are trying to make link between this community and to build another community not based on where they’re coming from, but on their work” (Camille Peteers). These communities communicate in digital spaces such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook groups: “Online forums are also commonly used to monitor clients, share resources, pass along advice, and otherwise help their fellow workers ... workers are connecting [and] organising in virtual networks of their own” (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021, p. 51). Such digital networks are important connecting points for unions and can be starting points for innovative forms of worker solidarity and resistance, including self-organisation outside of formal union structures.

Both in food delivery and 24-hour caregivers, and even in platform mediated cleaning, such migrant communities exist. The caregivers use Facebook to exchange information. Their Facebook pages were the gateway to the initiation of forming an association. The activist from IG24 started with informational Vlogs on YouTube which she shared on the Facebook pages: “Because I thought video is simply more appealing. And it’s more accessible. You don’t have to read” (own translation). However, the agencies also use Facebook to spread their information or thwart posts by IG24. Within my worker sample, the Sri Lankan workers mentioned WhatsApp groups for migrants from Sri Lanka in different cities. In these groups, many people work via *haushaltshilfe24.at* and information and advice on their work are passed on to newcomers: “Yes, it's very helpful. It’s providing so many information about here and the jobs” (Tharushi). That is also one of the reasons why all the Sri Lankan workers in my sample started work via this platform. They also meet regularly and exchange working experiences with co-workers: “So many things I learn from my friends” (Chamari).

Momentum for the labour movement can also be generated or reinforced when *popular workers* from such communities join the movement or call for supporting it:

What we also observe is that when you have a strong person in the communities, I don’t want to say an influencer ... who is better known in the communities on Facebook, then women simply come because she is there (labour activist, IG24, own translation).

In food delivery, *international networking* provided a crucial momentum for collective organisation. Companies of a certain size that employ workers in several EU member states are required by EU law to grant a European Works Council the right to information and consultation by company management. This led to international networking among workers from several EU countries at the expense of the company:

International networking is incredibly important, but first and foremost for motivation. When people see that the same problems exist all over the world, but that there are also people around the world who are organizing themselves and that we are not the only ones here... That gives you strength (Adele Siegl, own translation).

Trade unions provide valuable resources in terms of finance, expertise, networks and institutional power resources, including access to negotiations on collective agreements. Therefore, the *behaviour of trade unions* and their relationship to the labour movements are of crucial importance:

But we have to be open to them and be their allies and partners on the path to fighting for their rights and representation... Or I can act stupidly and say, but they're not with us or they're doing things differently than we want, or whatever. And then block them, so to speak, or put obstacles in their way. So there are two approaches, and you can observe both. (Expert, Austrian Chamber of Labour, own translation)

Trade unions have been very important in supporting labour struggles in the platform mediated food delivery sector in the EU. Many of the bottom-up initiatives that formed in this sector are now part of the unions, receive resources and develop strategies together.

Nevertheless, there have been and continue to be difficulties both in their relationship with bottom-up movements and in their approach to platform work in general. This has several reasons. First, most platform workers are *not employees* – the traditional membership base for trade unions. Many resources within the trade unions are pooled for negotiating collective agreements, which in the end only benefit a handful of people in the platform economy. Some trade unions have demonstrated some innovation by developing sector organisations aimed at representing self-employed people as well. These union organisations, however, such as *vidaflex* in Austria and *United Freelancers* in Belgium, primarily offer advice and are sometimes viewed as apolitical and negatively evaluated by activists involved in platform work:

It's a service organization and has no political clout. I don't know what it is, but it's not a union. And I'll make myself look ridiculous in front of my colleagues if I promote something that costs €25 a month in membership fees (Adele Siegl, own translation).

Second, *platform work cuts across various industries* and therefore sometimes conflicts with the sectoral organization of trade unions. Opting for one strategy to organise platform workers

is therefore only a viable option if the industry specific unions cooperate. It can also happen, however, that sector organisations within the unions compete for resources to deal with the issue of platform work.

Third, Trade unions are sometimes struggling to *venture into new sectors* and build a new membership base: “It’s a chicken-and-egg problem. I don’t do anything because I don’t have any members, and I don’t have any members because I don’t do anything” (Robert Walasinski, own translation). Bottom-up initiatives can be the initiating spark in such cases: “For us, the difference is that we are also there for non-members ... and at the end of the day, we have actually increased the membership [in the union] tenfold or something like that” (Robert Walasinski, own translation).

Views and *strategies within the unions* can also *differ*. For example, on the question whether a priority should be regularisation of undocumented work or of employment status, differences in strategies exist between unions and workers’ demands in Belgium – although there would be a way to reconcile these two goals:

The best we can do is push for regularisation on the basis of work ... So it’s the same question, it’s only a question of strategy that it’s much easier to force the government to make people employed then to ask the government to regularise people (trade unionist).

Trade unions also sometimes have difficulties in acknowledging that workers’ preferences have changed to some extent with regard to flexibility: “The fact that people prefer flexibility to security, to a fixed salary, or to Christmas and vacation bonuses, didn’t quite sink in with the union” (Adele Siegl, own translation).

Finally, trade unions also *struggle to react* to the new kinds of governance mechanisms that platform businesses apply – including cross-border work, algorithmic management and bogus self-employment. In the face of the broader trend of platformisation of the economy, however, stakes are high for the unions: “If you succeed in organising platform workers effectively, I believe you will also have the tools to reorganise existing companies, increase the level of organisation, and make organisational work more successful” (expert, Austrian Chamber of Labour, own translation).

When it comes to caregivers, however, activists tend to be much more sceptical of unions:

They avoid this topic as much as they can... So the most common argument is social partnership ... They don’t want to take a position because the Chamber of Commerce is responsible and they should regulate it ... On the one hand, they admit that yes, the working conditions are difficult, it’s precarious, even exploitative ... But they don’t want to make any proposals ... The Chamber of Labor says that it would be too expensive to hire caregivers (labour activist, IG24, own translation).

5.3.3 Institutional power

Institutional power accrues from values, norms and rights that workers have managed to establish and can refer to in order to support their struggle. Institutional power therefore contains instruments relating to legal regulation, litigation, treaties and corporate governance. This section will discuss the effectiveness of these instruments in the context of platform labour and platform mediated cleaning more specifically.

5.3.3.1 Legal regulation and the EU Platform Work Directive – No reason to rejoice for cleaners?

Although there is a body of relevant legislation at EU level – including the Transparent and predictable working conditions directive (TPWC), the General data protection regulation (GDPR), the Platform-to-Business regulation (P2B), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the Digital Services Act (DSA) as well as the EUPWD (for an assessment see European Commission (2021) and Rainone and Aloisi (2024)) – unfavourable legal conditions concerning the rights and the employment status of platform workers remain an obstacle.

It has become clear until now, that, regarding the improvement of the legal situation, the platform workers' struggle to improve their working conditions cannot be limited to labour law but most *include migration law* as well. For as long as migrants will be discriminated on the labour market by limiting their access to jobs, limiting their working time, limiting their access to social services, lengthy procedures for the recognition of qualifications, or discriminatory application practices – as long as this continues, there will also be a precarious population that is forced to submit to excessive exploitation, leading to unfair competition and pressure on labour standards in the industry:

When people say, 'Nah, that's too tedious for me, I'm not doing it, or I don't care, because it's all foreigners anyway' – no, folks, I'm sorry, but they're also screwing over all the great local companies just because they can exploit the system (Robert Walasinski, own translation).

Other issues in regulating platform work include *lack of resources of labour inspectorates* to address platform work “which typically occurs in private spaces (homes) or dispersed public spaces (city streets), rather than a ‘normal’ static workplace” (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 18) as well as *cross-border work*. Cross-border work results from either the platform, client or worker being located in different countries, the worker moving from one country to another to do platform work, or the worker being active on different platforms that are located in different countries. This makes it more difficult to identify the party responsible for social insurance and tax payments, and to monitor and enforce local regulations.

The *use of intermediaries* by DLPs to circumvent labour law is also an obstacle to apply legal rules. Through this practice, DLPs pass responsibility for legal violations on to subcontractors. Even if the subcontractors are punished, the system remains unchanged.

Misclassification is another highly significant problem in platform work (Gandini, 2019; Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna, 2024). DLPs generally avoid being classified as an employer and jurisdictions in the EU struggle to be clear with regard to this issue, which also means that, until now, platform companies do not have the same reporting and transparency obligations as their non-platform counterparts (EC, 2021) – a deficiency that will somewhat improve with the commencement of the EUPWD in autumn 2026. Lack of political will and bureaucratic capacities as well as legal uncertainty in applying labour law in the context of platform work are both reasons for this situation.

Legal uncertainties exist because legal definitions of an employee may be unclear or lacking altogether. In Austria, for example, there is no statutory definition of an employee (Fairwork, 2022). Furthermore – and more specific to platform work – the algorithms used by the DLPs often have a significant impact on the autonomy of the worker but are opaque to outsiders, making it difficult to judge whether workers can be considered subordinated or not. Some jurisdictions – like Germany and Austria – consider “personal dependence” as an indicator to derive employee status, which entails, for example, instructions and regular monitoring by the employer. In the working reality of many platform workers, however, these tasks are performed by an app, or, more precisely, by a management that uses an algorithm to establish a more indirect relationship between itself and the worker. This does not necessarily diminish dependence of the worker on the platform, and, to the contrary, might even enhance it. Proposals, brought forward by employee representatives, for example, have been to substitute the term “personal dependence” with “economic dependence”, which would make it easier to legally classify (platform) workers as employees (Chamber of Labour, 2022).

Misclassification also implies that *competition law* can stand in the way of self-employed workers trying to organise collectively due to the suspect of creating a cartel. In countries like Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands, there have been such cases, although the majority of jurisdictions in the EU do not pursue them. In fact, the EU created (non-binding) guidelines for national competition authorities not to go after self-employed workers who negotiate prices collectively.

A law to address many of these issues is the EUPWD, which came into effect on October 23, 2024. The Platform Work Directive provides the first legal definition of platform work and

covers three core areas: determining the correct employment status of platform workers, dealing with algorithmic management, and the platforms' obligations to provide information to authorities and employee representatives. Following the entry into force of the directive, Member States now have two years to implement it.

This includes that platforms are not allowed to process personal data that is not necessary for the performance of work, such as data on a person's emotional or mental state or data that allows conclusions to be drawn about their origin, political and religious views, or possible labour disputes. Platforms must also make automated evaluation systems transparent to workers, their representatives, and national authorities, and automated decisions must be monitored by humans.

Platforms are further obliged to provide new services designed to improve working conditions. These include a contact person for challenging algorithmic decisions, the transferability of data (e.g., good reviews) between platforms, and the provision of a communication channel through which platform workers can communicate with each other privately and securely. Appropriate protection and prevention measures for health risks and reporting channels for cases of violence or harassment are also included.

Many of the provisions, particularly those relating to data protection and information and accountability obligations with regard to automated evaluation and decision-making mechanisms, apply to both employees and self-employed or freelance workers.

However, the most controversial section of the directive, and the one most feared by platforms, is the one concerning the determination of the correct employment status of platform workers. The aim here is to combat bogus self-employment by introducing a legal presumption of an employment relationship. If this presumption is triggered – e.g., by a self-employed platform worker claiming in court that they are actually in an employment relationship – then the burden is on the platform to prove the contrary (“rebuttable presumption”). Instead of a uniform EU-wide regulation, however, each member state is to determine the appropriate implementation of the legal presumption for itself, i.e., it ultimately depends on the member states how much the directive benefits bogus self-employed platform workers.

In summary, the EUPWD establishes some progressive measures that will benefit platform workers in general. A huge issue with the rebuttable presumption of employment is, however, that workers might face great barriers in initiating a case for their false employment classification in the first place:

What we fear is that unless you find some mechanism in the transposition of the directive to protect the workers with a collective action, that is ... to be protected by the trade union ... it's a barrier for the worker because he has to challenge the platform with the risk of losing the job, most probably (expert, ETUI).

In Belgium, a very similar law based on the directive was passed in January, 2024, with a similar chapter on tackling the issue of bogus self-employment, including changing the burden of proof to platforms and even defining specific criteria for determining when a working relationship constitutes an employment relationship. A Belgian trade unionist explains:

In the final text of the law they didn't take up a clear procedure on how to have a short procedure for a rider to say I'm an employee ... And that's why we say that the implementation of this directive is very important, because the proof of Belgium is that it didn't change anything, until now (trade unionist).

The question whether the directive will actually have an impact on misclassification in platform work, therefore, remains questionable and a matter of national interpretation and implementation.

For platform mediated cleaners, however, it might not provide any improvements at all. First of all, the section on correct classification of platform workers is not relevant for cleaners, as their main problem is not misclassification, but the lack of protection due to undeclared work, isolation, dangerous working environments, and a lack of institutional ties. Both provisions on establishing communication channels and protection and prevention measures for health risks, as well as reporting channels for cases of violence or harassment would benefit cleaners who are particularly isolated and exposed to (sexual) violence and harmful behaviour.

The main problem is, however, that the EUPWD might not even apply to platform mediated cleaners. This is due to the legal definition of DLPs that underlies the directive. The directive defines a DLP as a digital service that involves “the organisation of work performed by individuals in return for payment ... [and] the use of automated monitoring or decision-making systems” (Directive (EU) on improving working conditions in platform work 2024). Thus, DLPs are defined as digital services that “organise work” – a formulation that remains ambiguous – and a focus is on algorithmic management. It is clear that DLPs in the transport sector have a much greater impact on work processes than online marketplace scenarios with low levels of algorithmic control – chosen by many DLPs for domestic work such as haushaltshilfe24.at. Depending on the legal interpretation of “organising work”, then, it is quite possible that DLPs such as haushaltshilfe24.at do not even fall within the scope of the Directive, as they do not meet the criterion of “organising work” and are therefore not considered DLPs.

5.3.3.2 Lobbying

Lobbying is a double-edged sword. Due to the very uneven distribution of resources and the resulting unequal representation of corporate interests versus workers' interests at the EU level, but also at the national level ([Lobbying in Brussels 2019 3.pdf](#)), EU legislation in particular often leans toward corporate interests. Nevertheless, lobbying also offers opportunities for worker-oriented organisations and is considered a very important tool by some experts who have been directly or indirectly involved in legislative processes: “It helped a lot having the workers involved ... talking to the decision-makers, having them demonstrating, making pressure” (Florine Roos).

Some of the channels of influence at EU level by DLPs and platform workers can be reconstructed using the EUPWD as an example. Digital platform companies were extremely active in lobbying throughout the legislative process, from its inception to its conclusion, both in the European Parliament and the Commission – as can be easily verified via the European Transparency Register – and in the Council. Even though there are no transparency requirements for the latter, based on the positions of the individual member states and their sometimes close ties to platform companies, as reported in journalistic sources, it is reasonable to assume that there is strong corporate influence on the Council (Pfeiffer, 2024). However, the focus here should be less on the lobbying of companies and more on the resources of workers and worker representatives to influence political processes through lobbying.

With employment misclassification, undeclared work and contracting precarised (migrant) populations being common practices by DLPs, activists and experts from trade unions, policy making and research generally agree that some issues can only be tackled politically, through legal regulation. Influencing legal regulation is therefore one of the most important strategies of labour movements in the platform economy.

Lobbying is only possible, of course, when labour associations with a high degree of organisation have been formed – which is not the case for cleaners. With food delivery being the largest sector in the platform labour economy and the one with the highest degree of organised labour, worker representatives from this sector demonstrated significantly more capacities to influence political processes than all the other sectors. This might also be one of the reasons why the EUPWD defines platform work in a way that does not necessarily include business models which deviate from those common in food delivery and ride hailing.

The European Left played an important role in giving workers and worker representatives from the platform economy, especially from the food delivery industry, access to important people

and processes. According to her assistant, Florine Roos, the topic of platform work had been on Leila Chaibi's agenda – MEP for the European Left – since the beginning of her term as a member of parliament. An important ally was the then Commissioner for Jobs and Social Affairs, Nicolas Schmit, but the Greens and the S&D Group were also won over to the issue at an early stage. At the same time, there were also forces within the liberal and conservative parties, such as the union-affiliated EPP politician Dennis Radtke, who came to support the issue. Ultimately, the argument that DLPs lead to unfair competition due to their unregulated and sometimes illegal employment practices was decisive in forming a political alliance between the Left, Greens, S&D, EPP, and Renew to improve the working conditions of platform workers. So, while Parliament introduced a very progressive draft law, the other two EU legislative bodies – the Commission and the Council – put forward proposals that, especially in the case of the Council, leaned more toward corporate interests. The European Left also organised events on the topic of platform work, bringing together workers, researchers, and politicians (such as the Transnational Forum on Alternatives to Uberization), or invited platform workers to Nicolas Schmit's office:

When the European Commission is making a proposal, it's sometimes very business oriented ... it's also because they are not used to see workers ... and with this directive we had a good example of bringing people, workers, like genuine workers in front of them, and they listen as well, as they listen to business, they can also listen to workers, and I think that has been effective (Florine Roos).

Coalitions with political parties and other political bodies therefore represented effective ways of using institutional resources to influence legislation. In addition to the Parliament and the Commission, there are other institutionalized channels through which workers' representatives can influence EU policy. These include, for example, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) – a body with an advisory function – as well as the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI). These bodies consolidate and harmonize the demands of national trade union confederations and provide research insights, thus offering important sources of information for policy-makers.

5.3.3.3 *Legal action*

Appeals to labour courts have been a common strategy to improve working conditions for platform workers, with unions supporting individual workers financially and legally. By mid-2022, an estimated 220 rulings by courts and administrative bodies on employment issues in platform work had been enforced in Europe (Piasna, 2024).

The effectiveness of litigation as a strategy for enforcing workers' interests is limited, however. On the one hand, courts are in some cases already more progressive than the law when it comes

to the question of whether a person is employed or self-employed: “The jurisprudence in some countries is actually starting to go beyond this control, direction, subordination and rely on other criteria that maybe are not yet in the law, because they think they are not sufficient” (expert, ETUI). On the other, several factors limit the effectiveness of litigation. As already pointed out, in the prevailing context of *regulatory vacuum*, decisions have varied. Most legislations in the EU, including Austria, lack a clear legal definition of what constitutes an employee. Therefore, although most of the legal cases on the employment status of platform workers within the EU resulted in granting employee status, some also concluded with a self-employed status (see, for example, Eurofound, 2025).

Litigation also puts the worker at *high risk* and induces *high costs with limited benefits* in the case of winning. Court procedures on employment status often take several years, are extremely resource intensive, and workers risk losing their job even if they win the case. Legal costs and need for expertise therefore make litigation an unviable strategy for most workers (EC, 2021). These prospects, together with blackmailing and intimidation by the corporation, create great barriers for initiating procedures in the first place. Of course, trade unions can support workers in trials and cushion some of these risks. The effectiveness of court rulings remains limited, however, as they apply only for specific cases and do not change the legislative framework or political environment. Therefore, they have *failed to initiate broader change*. Moreover, DLPs “have responded to unfavourable rulings by unilaterally changing the terms and conditions of the contracts, or their phrasing, to evade the applicability of a ruling” resulting in only a limited impact overall (Vandaele et al., 2024, pp. 6-7).

Finally, some DLPs have been reported to simply ignore court rulings. Even in cases where courts found illegal employment practices, some platform still continued. In Belgium, for example, a trade unionist reports: “They started a court case ... Now was the final judgment that Deliveroo needs to employ the riders ... Still nothing happened. Still nothing changed”. One of the reasons why DLPs sometimes get away with *illegal behaviour* and why nothing changes in terms of the systemic problems is a lack of political will. Labour inspections are sometimes not well enough equipped to perform their tasks, or policy-makers do not care enough about undocumented workers: “As a trade union, we also don’t want to say how many there are, or count ... because if you say they are all illegal, the government will stop caring” (trade unionist). Indeed, there is also a political interest in keeping certain sectors informal to guarantee cheap services. One reason why the IG24, for example, is struggling so much to change employment regulations in their sector is because the Chamber of Commerce – that should represent the caregivers – does not represent the workers but the businesses. The

Chamber of Labour, however, is not willing to represent the workers either. The reason is that they also fear that employment would be too expensive for the households and the state. Thus, instead of finding political solutions for the systematic precarisation of people, everyone – except for the workers – prefers a solution that enables cheap supply of care work to Austrians at the expense of foreign workers: “There is zero political interest in introducing truly regulated and secure employment conditions ... The Chamber of Labour ... are afraid that the system would actually collapse“ (labour activist, IG24, own translation).

In summary, legal proceedings are therefore not particularly promising, even if they can lead to improvements in individual cases:

Two years of court proceedings, fighting against a powerful opponent, having to present evidence that is essentially all held by the company... And ultimately, for what? Perhaps you will receive an additional payment of 2,000 euros, obtain employment, and then be dismissed again after three months. And even if all that goes through, it only applies to that one person and doesn't change the situation for thousands of others. And that's just as much a part of the companies' calculations as advertising vouchers ... It's always good when someone does something, we think it's great, but structurally nothing changes and it's just a waste of resources. (Robert Walasinski, own translation)

Legal recourse is completely ruled out in cases of *illegal employment*, moreover. In general, working illegally reduces institutional power tremendously. It means that workers cannot invoke labour law and, in the event of illegal behaviour on the part of clients, cannot take legal action without being subjected to repression themselves or losing their source of income. Thus, even in the plentiful reported cases of sexual harassment, threats of violence, mistreatment and wage theft, legal action is not an option for most cleaners as it would put them at risk of losing their work and being punished: “You can't fight with them and can't complain about it” (Pooja).

5.3.3.4 *Corporate governance and informal channels*

Other channels of institutional power can be found in corporate governance including participation in decision-making related to their work, or supportive management and social support by colleagues, such as equal treatment, receiving help and regular feedback. Thus, corporate governance can provide a reference point for improving working conditions, although this is unlikely in the case of DLPs, due to their business model being characterised by focussing on its core assets, fast scalability and a *low level of responsibility*.

Indeed, research suggests that “platform workers have limited ... opportunities to participate in decision-making and are not informed or consulted on business performance and decisions” (Fairwork, 2024; Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 86). In Austria, the situation seems to be somewhat better, as Fairwork (2022, p. 3) found that of the six DLPs they examined “[m]ost ... could

demonstrate that they have channels for workers to communicate with a human representative and, in many cases, these channels are considered reliable and effective”. Because of the poor working conditions related to high inter-worker competition, non-standard employment, isolation, and lack of organisational structure, social support from management or colleagues is generally considered low, too (Fairwork, 2024; Kilhoffer et al., 2020).

These previous findings are consistent with both the results of my study on Haushaltshilfe24.at and the reports of labour activists from food delivery as well as 24-hour care, as carelessness is integral to DLPs’ business model (to prevent classification as an employer):

You can write a hundred times in the newsletter, ‘Follow the traffic rules, be nice to your restaurants’ and whatever else, but if the system is based on getting things done as quickly as possible, because otherwise you’ll be put on hold and won’t get any money, or at least less money, then people will do just that (Fabio Hofer).

The same is true for haushaltshilfe24.at. They may inform people on their platform that a cleaning job requires an employment relationship. Undeclared work will most likely remain the norm, however, as long as it is cheaper, workers earn more from it, or they have to resort to it due to low pay in other jobs or discrimination in the labour market.

Previous findings also suggest that the majority of platform workers does “not receive a formal contract but [is] instead referred to the terms and conditions stipulated by the platform, which workers have to accept” (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 70). DLPs are known to take advantage of this informational asymmetry by including *unfair* and sometimes legally invalid *clauses*. The Fairwork Austria study concluded that out of six DLPs in Austria, “only one platform was able to evidence that workers aren’t faced with unfair clauses” (Fairwork, 2022, p. 3). If subcontractors are involved (as is often the case for domestic work), they found that platforms “rarely monitor their subcontractors vis-à-vis working conditions” (Fairwork, 2022, p. 3). Unfair clauses – like high commissions, cancellation fees and drastic compensation or penalty payments if workers conduct business outside the platform – may even lead to platform workers being indebted to a DLP (Bor, 2021). DLPs are further found to utilise power asymmetries by reserving the right to terminate the relationship with a worker “without giving workers prior notice or information as to why this decision was made“, for example by deactivating their account (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 70). This is especially problematic when platform workers have invested considerably into working equipment (like taxi licenses, cars, e-scooters, or digital devices).

Unfair terms and conditions in the case of haushaltshilfe24.at exist mainly due to the platform’s infrastructure creating *unequal positions*, in which customers can arbitrarily evaluate workers,

but not vice versa, with online ratings being crucial factors in determining workers' chances to receive jobs. This reduces the power of workers and leads to increased pressure to submit to the demands and wishes of clients. Some scholars have also proposed using digital means to monitor those in positions of power, a concept they call "*sousveillance*" (Do et al., 2024). Workers could collect data on customers and platforms (and their algorithms), which might "promote organizational transparency; ... strengthen accountability; and ... increase feelings of empowerment" and thereby also support collectivising efforts (Do et al., 2024). An instrument that would allow cleaners to collect and share information on clients would certainly improve their position and reduce exposure to risk of violence and harmful behaviour substantially.

Besides corporate governance, *informal communication channels* can also prove useful to worker power. On the one hand, this denotes good relationships by labour activists with management to open and sustain communication. On the other, having informants inside the management is also highly useful to know about their plans and be able to mobilise against detrimental measures in time: "I always relied on little birds whispering ... Sometimes it was people in the office, and sometimes it was just people who knew something from hearsay" (Adele Siegl, own translation).

5.3.4 Societal power

Societal power stems from cooperation with civil society groups (coalitional power) and support by the public, especially through influencing public discourse in their favour (discursive power). To date, no research has been conducted examining the resources available to platform workers for setting and influencing discourses. Labour activists from both food delivery and 24-hour care consider the media, including social media, to be an important instrument, however. Connections to the media are important to be able to formulate the perspective of labour and to provide the workers or trade unions' *frames of interpretation* to the public: "Simply to provide a counterbalance and offer a different perspective" (Robert Walasinski, own translation). The media also works faster than the courts, helping with more immediate concerns. It can be used to generate publicity for protests, as well as putting pressure on businesses due to *reputational damage*: "It's important, of course, because image is everything for the company, and if you piss them off long enough, they'll change colours" (Robert Walasinski, own translation).

Nonetheless, media relations also have their limits. Firstly, companies also know how to use it to their advantage. Secondly, they are not suited for specific, complex issues with differing

perspectives among the workers but limited to more simplistic relationships and spectacular events: “But such questions of detail... people aren't interested in that. All they understand is: ‘Okay, food couriers are not doing well’” (Adele Siegl, own translation). Finally, using the media can also damage relations with management, especially if facts are misrepresented. The assessment of the labour activist from IG24 of their influence on public discourse is therefore quite sobering: “Nothing is improving, we have achieved enough visibility. One hundred percent. I can say... I think the public knows us, the media, political actors, stakeholders know us, the problem is well known, but unfortunately this hopelessness is so great” (labour activist, IG24, own translation).

Coalitions with NGOs and other activist groups are regarded as important for worker support and pressuring DLPs (Piasna, Zwysen, & ILO, 2022; Vandaele et al., 2024). Riders, for example, cooperate with workers from other industries and NGOs that promote the interests of undocumented workers, which increases their reach and strengthens their mobilisation potential. For the IG24, coalitions with student initiatives, the Chamber of Labour, and migrant counselling centres are also important in order to secure human and financial resources and to be able to refer workers to other institutions.

5.3.5 Synopsis: Worker power in the platform economy

My analysis has shown that platform workers face a multitude of hurdles when trying to assert their interests against corporate interests. In the sectors I have analysed, these obstacles are not always the same. Accordingly, power resources and their potentials also differ between sectors. Tables 5 and 6 provide short and simplified summaries of the results of my analysis, both in terms of constraints and opportunities for worker power. The tables present the most severe constraints and the most successful or promising power resources for the respective sectors. The list of constraints and opportunities is not comprehensive, therefore. In this section, I will briefly summarise the most important insights from the power resource analysis.

For riders, employment status, misclassification and legal uncertainty are main barriers concerning both structural, associational and institutional power. Employment status, misclassification and detrimental labour law are also main barriers for 24-hour caregivers, who are self-employed despite extreme dependence on both intermediaries and clients. For cleaners, undeclared work is a main obstacle, which impedes structural, associational and institutional power. Isolation and intimate relationships with supervisors are also among the most severe constraints to caregivers and cleaners both in terms of structural and associational power. Furthermore, the experience of migration – including not wanting to stand out in a negative

way, being overwhelmed with new challenges and lacking work experience in the country – is an obstacle to structural power in all three sectors. This is reinforced by experiences of labour market discrimination and exclusionary migration policies.

	Riders	24-hour caregivers	Cleaners
Structural power	Replaceability of workers; employment status; inter-worker competition; migration experience	Economic dependence; employment status; isolation; intimate relationships with supervisors; migration experience	Undeclared work; discrimination in the labour market; isolation; intimate relationships with supervisors; migration experience
Associational power	Employment status; union busting; fissured working realities; high turnover and low commitment; heterogeneous relationships to DLP	Employment status; lack of resources; isolation; fissured working realities; language barriers; lack of organisational structure; detrimental behaviour by trade unions	Undeclared work; isolation; fissured working realities; language barriers; high turnover and low commitment; lack of organisational structure; heterogeneous relationships to DLP; lack of knowledge about collective rights
Institutional power	Use of intermediaries; misclassification and legal uncertainty; lobbying; unfair contracts	Cross-border work; misclassification and detrimental labour law; lobbying; lack of organisational structure; unfair contracts	Use of intermediaries; undeclared work; lack of organisational structure; unfair contracts

Table 5: Constraints to worker power

Note: Only the most severe constraints to worker power are presented.

High turnover and low commitment as well as fissured working realities are among the main hurdles to organise effectively in all three sectors. The lack of an organisational structure that provides effective communication channels between workers or towards the platform operators are two highly important obstacles to both caregivers and cleaners as it reinforces isolation and increases their vulnerability to (sexual) violence. Heterogeneous relationships of workers towards the DLP resulting from their different socio-economic and migration statuses are a crucial obstacle to riders and cleaners in forming a common identity and common interests. At least for cleaners, my data shows that language barriers and lack of knowledge about collective rights are also among the main constraints to associational power. Trade unions show different behaviours towards riders and caregivers. They support riders and provide valuable resources, while caregivers complain about detrimental behaviour and a resulting lack of resources.

Unfair contracts including the terms and conditions of the DLPs as well as contracts between workers, clients and other intermediaries, are a big problem in all three sectors. This includes practices such as unilateral evaluation systems, changing terms and conditions without informing workers, unjustified deletes of accounts, or non-solicitation agreements. From the data I obtained, lobbying by businesses also emerged as a hurdle for both riders and caregivers. The use of intermediaries – third parties that (sub-)contract workers, including clients for household services – appeared as an issue for riders and cleaners, insofar as DLPs can dodge responsibility for illegal employment practices.

On the other hand, the results of my analysis also reveal similarities and differences in the potential power resources, strategies, and goals that workers and worker representatives have or can utilise. None of the examined sectors indicate significant potential for structural power resources. This does not mean that strikes cannot be effective in certain cases. Due to the prevalence of self-employment or undeclared work and the high degree of isolation, however, they are not particularly promising. Furthermore, economic dependence, labour market discrimination and thread of poverty as well as reserve army mechanisms greatly reduce the effectivity of exiting.

	Riders	24-hour caregivers	Cleaners
Structural power	-	-	-
Associational power	Existence of communities; international networking; supportive behaviour by trade unions	Existence of communities; use of digital communication channels; engaging popular workers	(Existence of communities); (use of digital communication channels)
Institutional power	Sousveillance; lobbying; informal communication channels; (EUPWD)	Sousveillance	Sousveillance
Societal power	Coalitions with civil society groups and other sector organisations; media	Coalitions with civil society groups	-

Table 6: Opportunities for worker power

Note: Only the most successful or promising power resources are presented. The brackets indicate a higher degree of uncertainty.

It became apparent that the existence of communities (often built around language, culture or country of origin) and the use of digital communication channels were important entry points

and connecting factors for the organisation of riders and caregivers. Based on the findings from my sample of cleaners, these communities also exist in platform mediated domestic work and use messengers and social media to connect. International networking and support by trade unions are particularly important in the organisation of riders. Due to their relatively high degree of organisation, lobbying was also a highly significant means to influence policy making for riders. Whether the EUPWD will significantly improve the working conditions of riders remains to be seen, but there are good reasons to believe it will – at least in countries with well-established labour institutions, such as Austria. *Sousveillance* – the use of digital means to collect and share data on customers and platforms (and their algorithms) by workers – has been identified by trade unions as an important tool to support platform workers' struggles (Wray, 2025). It would certainly increase the power of caregivers and cleaners insofar as it would decrease informational asymmetries between workers and clients, increase their autonomy to choose (and neglect) clients and thus also improve their safety. Such tools might also help riders to understand and strategically interact with algorithms managing their work process. Finally, coalitions are crucial for activists in both food delivery and 24-hour-caregiving, as they provide resources, increase their reach and enable exchange and action across sectors.

6 Conclusion

With the EUPWD officially enacted on October 23, 2024, member states are currently working on its concrete implementation in their jurisdictions. Both platform work itself and interest in platform work from scholars, trade unions and political actors continues to grow. At the same time, there is still a lack of research in the field and a lack of political representation, which is particularly true for platform mediated care workers. Although care workers are known to often suffer under bad working conditions, including lack of protection due to illegal employment and vulnerability to violence and sexual harassment, they are often omitted in public debates, research and media attention, and political negotiations. This research aimed at contributing to the visibility of platform mediated domestic cleaners and add to closing these gaps by investigating both working conditions of platform mediated domestic cleaners in Vienna and obstacles and opportunities to worker power in platform work. In line with transdisciplinary research, a main motivation of this project is to translate the findings into useful resources to support workers coping with or fighting against bad working conditions by publishing some of the results in low-threshold formats, including blog articles and information brochures.

I approached the issue from an interdisciplinary perspective that combined theoretical insights from political economy, labour sociology, feminist and critical race theory. The analysis was based on an extensive literature review as well as eighteen interviews with platform mediated domestic cleaners and experts from science, politics and labour activism. It proceeded in three steps. In a first step, I investigated the structural conditions that enable (or at least support) the economic viability of DLPs and thus provide the material conditions for their emergence and operation. I found that DLPs require substantial amounts of capital with a high affinity towards risk for a long period. Demand for platform mediated services depends on low prices and easy accessibility, which are achieved through low labour costs and oversupply of labour. Therefore, a reserve army of a potential workforce who are dependent on the income from platform jobs or use it as a second source of income and thus enjoy a certain degree of security from their first job are factors supporting the business operation of DLPs and their (potential) profitability. This observation entails a structural link between the economic viability of DLPs and broader developments driving labour market segmentation and the commodification of labour, producing precarity and increasing pressure on the reserve army to take any job, even if it entails high risks with low effective remuneration. Such developments include neoliberal welfare state reforms and austerity measures, labour market flexibilization/deregulation, weakening of organised labour and exclusionary and discriminatory migration policies. At the same time,

demand is driven by certain crisis tendencies, including the Covid-19 and the care crisis. Concerning the latter, DLPs for care services act as “displacers” of the crisis onto new regions and subjects (“care fix”).

The second step of my analysis concerned working conditions and experiences of domestic cleaning workers on [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at). I identify four major sets of issues pertaining to platform mediated cleaners, with undeclared work and the platform’s design of its digital infrastructure as the main causes: lack of protection and vulnerability of workers to (sexual) violence, which is the most pressing issue; lack of protection and vulnerability to overexploitation; workers constantly having to renegotiate roles; and information asymmetry, data protection and arbitrary disciplining measures through unfair customer ratings. Workers cope with these risks in a number of ways, including exiting or ignoring, communicating strict boundaries, blaming themselves or sharing experiences. All in all, however, precarious living conditions combined with the platform’s design create an extremely uneven playing field, with potential clients in a far more powerful position than workers. Therefore, coping mechanisms cannot effectively address these risks.

Despite all these perils, all interviewed workers judged the platform positively. This seemingly contradictory finding shows how important it is to consider job satisfaction against the backdrop of socioeconomic conditions and previous experience in the labour market. It can be explained by the fact that all interviewees had been affected by labour market discrimination due to exclusionary migration policies, some had already experienced sexual violence and excessive exploitation, and in particular those who were dependent on a regular income appreciated the low barriers they had not experienced in the labour market before.

Finally, the third step of my analysis concerned worker power of platform workers and was based on the interviews with platform mediated cleaners as well as experts from science, politics, trade unions and labour activism including in platform mediated food delivery and 24-hour caregiving. My analysis of power resources for workers has shown that constraints to and potentials for worker power differ between the three sectors that I investigated. Commonalities between platform workers in the food delivery and the cleaning sector exist in that isolation, fissured working realities, high turnover and low commitment, migration experience, heterogeneous relationships to the platform as well as the use of intermediaries and unfair contracts (with the platform or clients) pose major impediments to worker power. For riders, misclassification, legal uncertainty and the resulting self-employed status of workers is a main barrier to effective organisation. In the case of cleaners, it is illegal employment and lack of an organisational structure that severely impede pathways to increase the power of workers.

At the same time, my analysis shows that riders have also achieved successes and that there is potential for both riders and cleaners. The existence of already established communities built around cultural commonalities continues to be an important factor in organising riders, and it appears to be a potential point of entry also in the case of cleaners. While for riders in the food delivery sector, a comparably high degree of organisation has lent great importance to power resources such as international networking, lobbying, coalitions with civil society groups and other sector organisations as well as cooperation with the press, cleaners lack any organisation. My analysis revealed, however, that a promising first step could be to use digital means to enable the collection and sharing of information on customers and establish a communication channel between cleaners. This would not only enable workers to make initial contact with each other but also counteract the information imbalance between clients and workers. This imbalance is one of the main causes of the constant threat of (sexual) violence to which cleaning workers are exposed. If they could exchange information about clients, this would at least be a first step toward enabling them to better protect themselves.

Some of the conceptual work that has been presented in this thesis might prove useful for future research on working conditions and worker power in other contexts, including the Work, Employment, Worker Power (WEP) model (table 1) and the causal model for specific working experience (figure 11). The conceptualisations of employment practices by DLPs (figures 1-5) might also be useful to grasp labour governance in DLPs for both research and policy making. Since on-demand platforms in passenger transport and food delivery are receiving a great deal of attention, it is important to distinguish between different types of platforms – for example, there are relevant differences in the governance techniques that distinguish on-demand platforms from online marketplace ones. Finally, figure 10 on research areas in the field of platform work provides some inspiration on possible future research. Once the EUPWD will have been implemented in the member states, future research could investigate implications for platform workers in different EU countries and what their different implementation reveals about relations of forces in the respective countries. Furthermore, more research is needed to shed light on platform mediated care services, including on working conditions, job satisfaction, connections to broader developments in the labour market and representative results concerning the profile of workers.

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Appendix

Appendix I: List of interview partners

Number	Date	Country	Interview partner
1	22.04.2024	Austria	Expert at the Austrian Chamber of Labour
2	04.06.2024	Brussels	Florine Roos, assistant to MEP Leila Chaibi from the European Left party
3	05.06.2024	Brussels	Cinzia del Rio, member of the European Economic and Social Committee
4	06.06.2024	Brussels	Expert at ETUI
5	06.06.2024	Brussels	Wouter Zwysen, expert at ETUI
6	07.06.2024	Brussels	Trade unionist
7	07.06.2024	Brussels	Camille Peteers, labour activist at MOC (Mouvement Ouvrier Chrétien)
8	12.07.2024	Austria	Fabio Hofer, food courier and labour activist
9	17.07.2024	Austria	Robert Walasinski, trade unionist
10	22.07.2024	Austria	Adele Siegl, trade unionist
11	07.05.2025	Austria	Worker on haushaltshilfe24.at
12	08.05.2025	Austria	Worker on haushaltshilfe24.at
13	09.05.2025	Austria	Worker on haushaltshilfe24.at
14	12.05.2025	Austria	Worker on haushaltshilfe24.at
15	12.05.2025	Austria	Worker on haushaltshilfe24.at
16	13.05.2025	Austria	Worker on haushaltshilfe24.at
17	30.05.2025	Austria	Worker on haushaltshilfe24.at
18	03.06.2025	Austria	Labour activist at IG24

Interview guideline – workers

I. Introduction
- How did you come to work for HH24? - Do you have other sources of income? Other platforms? - For how long have you been working on HH24? - What kinds of tasks are you doing for HH24? - What is the work like? Can you explain a bit about your daily work and work routine? - Have you encountered any problems, experienced bad situations during your work? - If so, what would you say are the key problems you encounter? - How do you deal with them?

Thematic questions:

II. Earnings and working time		
Main question	Secondary questions	Thema
(1) How many hours do you work via HH24 and what do you earn on average? (2) What problems do you see when it comes to the amount of work you have and the times you have to work? (3) How do you deal with these problems?	(1.1) What do your earnings depend on? (1.2) At what days and times do you work? (also weekends, evenings, nights)? (1.3) What are aspects or times during your work that you are not being paid? Like waiting hours, online presence, work equipment? (1.4) How much of your working time is this? (1.5) Can you live on your income earned via Haushaltshilfe24? (1.6) How do you deal with the low income? (2.1) Do you work e.g. irregular hours? Do you get extra pay for that? (2.2) How often do you look at HH24? (2.3) Does it impact your free time? How do you separate working time from leisure?	Earnings and working time, (issue of “fissured” work day and constant availability)
(1) Are you free to choose when to work and which jobs you want to do? If not, why not?	(1.1) Do you feel free to decline job offers? If not, why not? (1.2) Are there any sanctions if you decline a job or do something the way you want to do it? (1.3) Can you decide on your own what you do in your work?	Autonomy in the allocation of tasks; Autonomy in work organisation;

(2) Is it always clear, how long a job will take? If not, what happens if you have to work longer than anticipated?		Work intensity and speed pressure
III. Online intermediation		
Main questions	Secondary questions	Thema
(1) What works well with the intermediation via Haushaltshilfe24 and what does not? Why? (2) What personal data does the platform want you to share and why? (3) What aspects of your work are evaluated/rated, by whom and why?	(2.1) How important is the sharing of personal data (like a picture) for your getting a job and why? (3.1) How important do you consider customer ratings for your prospects of future jobs? Why? (3.2) Are there any possibilities of rating or sharing information on customers? If not, why not?	Surveillance, direction and performance appraisal
IV. Contracts		
Main questions	Secondary questions	Thema
(1) Concerning the rules of HH24 - What do you regard as fair or unfair about them? Like subscription fees? (2) Do you have contracts with customers / households? How fair are they?	(1.1) Are the terms and conditions transparent? Do you know the rules of the platform? (1.2) Is there a possibility to decline/negotiate certain terms and conditions when using the platform? (1.3) Have you ever been noticed about changes of terms and conditions? (2.1) Do you have a copy of your contract (or the form or terms you signed at the beginning)? (2.2) Have you read your contract (or the other form) and was it understandable?	Contracts
V. Tasks and risks during work		
Main questions	Secondary questions	Thema
(1) Do you ever feel underprepared or overqualified during your work? If so, when and why?		Task complexity and skills
(2) What do you think others value most in your work and why?		Emotional and care demands

(3) Have there ever been situations where you had to perform other tasks beyond what you were paid for? Please explain. (4) How would you judge the importance of your online presence and completeness of your profile (picture, etc.) and why?		
(1) Accidents and health problems – is that an issue at your work?	(1.1) What physical risks do you perceive in your work? What physical harm or strain results from your work? (1.2) Does HH24 inform you about risks? (1.3) How does HH24 mitigate those risks or does it also create risks? (1.4) How do you deal with these issues?	Physical environment
(1) Have you had any bad experiences with clients, online as well as offline? If you want, please elaborate. (2) How do you deal with these risks?	(1.1) Are you aware of instances of transgressive behaviour / clients expecting services that are not part of your job? If you want, please elaborate. (2.1) Is there any support by HH24 or the other workers? If so, how? If not, why not?	Adverse social behaviour and equal treatment
VI. Social relations to the platform, customers and to other workers		
Main questions	Secondary questions	Thema
(1) Do you have the impression that HH24 cares about your working conditions? Why (not)? (2) What channels exist to communicate with HH24? (3) Did you ever get in touch with other workers from HH24? Why (not)?	(2.1) How helpful are these channels? (3.1) Would you like to get in touch with other workers? Why (not)?	Supportive management and social support

(1) Do you know of any group that could support you in dealing with work related problems?	(1.1) Is there any contact and communication between you and other platform workers? If so, how? Why (not)? (like facebook groups, telegram groups, etc. to share information) (1.2) Are you member of a union? (1.3) What do you think of labour unions? (1.4) Are you covered by a collective agreement?	Representation
(1) Have you ever been consulted HH24 concerning your satisfaction with the platform or changes made by the management of the platform?		Participation in decision-making
VII. Training and future career		
(1) Why or why not are you planning to keep working via HH24? (2) What are your future career opportunities? (3) Does HH24 check your qualifications?		Training and career opportunities
VIII. Closing questions		
- What forms of support or changes would you wish for to improve your work via HH24? - Do you know other people who might be interested in an interview with me? - Is there anything else you would like to say? If further question or unclarities should come up, may I contact you again?		

General Information

Socio-demographic data	
<i>Questions concerning socio-demographic aspects</i>	<i>Answers</i>
(1) <i>Age</i> : How old are you?	
(2) <i>Residence</i> : Where do you live?	
(3) <i>Citizenship</i> : What citizenship do you have?	
(4) <i>Gender</i> : What is your gender?	
(4) <i>Formal qualification</i> : What education do you have or what (formal) qualifications have you acquired?	
(5) <i>Job history</i> : What did you do before you started this job? [Additional Question: What did you earn there (in this previous job)?]	
(6) <i>Care</i> : Do you have any obligations with regard to care (e.g. for children or also for elderly people)? [Additional question (if not answered yet): Do you have children?]	
Questions concerning current employment status	<i>Answers</i>
(7) <i>Employment status</i> : What is your employment status? (employed, self-employed, free service contractor, marginally employed, undeclared, unemployed, service check (Dienstleistungsscheck), student)	
(8) (Main) <i>employer</i> : Which company (platform) do you mainly work for? [Additional question: How long have you been working for this company?]	
(9) <i>Job history</i> : For how long have you been working in the care sector?	