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reproduction under capitalism?  
The case of digital care  
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# **Deepening or buffering the crisis of social reproduction under capitalism?**

## **The case of digital care and domestic work platforms**

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### ABSTRACT

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This study investigates platform companies offering care and domestic services through the lens of social reproduction theory. This perspective embeds these platforms in capitalism by foregrounding the fundamental dependence of the capitalist economy on the paid and unpaid socially reproductive work largely carried out by women in the home, communities, welfare state services and the (informal) market. Such work does not only reproduce life, but also, by so doing, the labor-power necessary to generate value in the economy. Based on five cases of care and domestic services platform companies operating in Italy, the analysis reveals their roots in the current crisis of social reproduction, or the ability of individuals, households and societies to socially reproduce life, through adequate care and income. We show how this crisis manifests itself in multiple forms in the lives of platforms' clients and

workers, who are both largely women. While all platforms claim to be the solution to this crisis, their effects are not univocal. On the one hand, platforms that operate as mere digital intermediaries deepen the crisis of social reproduction by expanding informal work on a large scale. On the other hand, platforms that proactively set the terms of employment foster the recognition of care and domestic work and workers' better protection. The study advances the extant literature by showing how, while care and domestic services platforms do not resolve the crisis of social reproduction, they might either deepen or buffer it. Their effects depend on how their business model and the related legal work status they offer to workers distribute costs, risks and value among workers and their households, customers, platforms themselves and the state. Distinct from legal perspectives, a social reproduction theory lens emphasizes how the different legal work statuses offered to care and domestic platform workers open up possibilities for their social struggles, whose outcomes however remain open-ended.

**Keywords:** care and domestic services platforms; social reproduction; capitalism; Italy; European Directive on Platform Work.

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## **Deepening or buffering the crisis of social reproduction under capitalism? The case of digital care and domestic work platforms**

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. Platform-mediated domestic and care work and the crisis of social reproduction: Taking a Social Reproduction Theory approach. – 3. The Italian case. – 4. The platform companies. – 5. Methodology. – 6. Findings. – 7. Conclusions.

### **1. Introduction**

The European Directive on Platform Work adopted in April 2024 by the European Parliament and the Council on improving working conditions in platform work defines platform work as «performed by individuals through the digital infrastructure of digital labour platforms that provide a service to their customers,» yet at once observes that platform work «occurs in a wide variety of fields and is characterised by a high level of heterogeneity in the types of digital labour platform, the sectors covered and activities carried out as well as in the profiles of individuals performing platform work» (1).

The burgeoning scientific literature on digital work platforms, which is largely focused on delivery and passenger transport, is increasingly turning towards digital work platforms providing domestic and care services to households(2). Across the globe, platforms such as Care.com and Helping offer services ranging from cleaning to baby-sitting, psychological services, and elderly care. They promise to create unprecedented work opportunities by offering workers flexible working hours, empowering them through income-generation, and facilitating their work-life balance. They argue that, by tapping into the labor power of inactive individuals who cannot be employed in regular

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(\*) Corrected in date 16.01.2025, see the Erratum: <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-2695/21069>

(1) Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on improving working conditions in platform work <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-89-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

(2) J. Ticona, A. Mateescu, A. Rosenblat, *Beyond disruption: How tech shapes labor across domestic work and ridehailing*, [https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data\\_Society\\_Beyond\\_Disruption\\_FINAL.pdf](https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data_Society_Beyond_Disruption_FINAL.pdf); F. Flanagan, *Theorising the Gig Economy and Home-Based Service Work*, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2019, 61, 1, 57-78; A. Hunt, E. Samman, *Gender and the Gig Economy: Critical Steps for Evidence-Based Policy*, ODI Working Paper No. 546. London: Overseas Development Institute, 2019; K. Jaehrling, F. Pereyra, L. Poblete, *Special Issue: The formalization of paid domestic work: Current trajectories and challenges ahead*, *International Labour Review*, 2024, 163, 3; L. Poblete, F. Pereyra, A. Tizziani, *Digital Intermediation in Paid Domestic Work in Argentina: An Analysis of Ambivalent Effects on Working Conditions*, *Critical Sociology*, 2024, online first.

jobs, they better allocate human resources, contributing to the increase of the overall activity rates and economic growth<sup>(3)</sup>.

The investigation of platforms offering domestic and care services is essential to gain a more accurate and comprehensive understanding not only of how platforms are inserting themselves into economies but also to fully appreciate how they are transforming them. Platforms reshape work not only through crowdsourcing of workers in the 'productive' sectors, but also work carried out for the social reproduction of life, including all «the activities, attitudes, behaviors, emotions, responsibilities, and relationships involved in maintaining daily life on a daily basis and intergenerationally»<sup>(4)</sup>. The emergent literature has pointed to how domestic and care services platforms represent a substantial share of platforms, accounting for the 22% of the total<sup>(5)</sup>. It is unlikely that this share will diminish, given the steadily rising share of socially reproductive sectors (e.g. health, education, social assistance services) in the GDP of high-income economies, a share that does not even account for the vast amount of unpaid care and domestic work carried out in households and the informal economy<sup>(6)</sup>.

Similar to other platforms, also platforms offering domestic and care services often co-opt workers through temporary contracts or without a contract rather than properly employing them<sup>(7)</sup>. They integrate this 'relative surplus population' in non-wage work intermittently into the formal economy on extremely precarious terms<sup>(8)</sup>. However, they largely enroll workers with socio-demographic profiles that are partially distinct from platforms operating in other sectors of the economy<sup>(9)</sup>. They rely more often on women, and disproportionately more on working-class women and women belonging to minoritized groups, such as migrant women and ethnicized and racialized women<sup>(10)</sup>. The emergent scholarship shows that platform-mediated care and domestic

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<sup>(3)</sup> E. Kambouri, *Gendering platform research*, *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*, 2022, 16, 1, 14-33; P. Rodríguez-Modroño, A. Agenjo-Calderón, P. López-Igual, *A Feminist Political Economic Analysis of Platform Capitalism in the Care Sector*, *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 2023, 55, 4, 629–638; P. Zanoni, *Labor market inclusion through predatory capitalism? The "sharing economy," diversity, and the crisis of social reproduction in the Belgian coordinated market economy*, *Work and labor in the digital age*, 2019, 33, 145-164; P. Zanoni, F. H. Pitts, *Inclusion through the platform economy?: The 'diverse' crowd as relative surplus populations and the pauperisation of labour*, in *The Routledge Handbook of the Gig Economy*. Routledge, 2022, 33-45.

<sup>(4)</sup> J. Brenner, B. Laslett, *Gender, social reproduction, and women's self-organization: Considering the US welfare state*, *Gender & Society*. 1991, 5, 3, 311-33.

<sup>(5)</sup> European Union, *Spotlight on digital platform workers in the EU*, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/digital-platform-workers/>.

<sup>(6)</sup> H. Hester, N. Srnicek, *The crisis of social reproduction and the end of work*, in *The age of perplexity: Rethinking the World we Knew*. Madrid, BBVA, OpenMind, Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial. Available at <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/the-crisis-of-social-reproduction-and-the-end-of-work/>, 2018.

<sup>(7)</sup> D. Stark, I. Pais, *Algorithmic management in the platform economy*, *Sociologica*, 2020, 14, 3, 47-72.

<sup>(8)</sup> P. Zanoni, F. H. Pitts, *Inclusion through the platform economy?* cit.

<sup>(9)</sup> E. Kambouri, *Gendering platform research*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(10)</sup> J. B. Schor, S. P. Vallas, *Labor and the platform economy*, in B. Heydari, O. Ergun, R. Dyal-Chand, Y. Bart (eds.), *Reengineering the Sharing Economy: Design, Policy, and Regulation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023; P. Zanoni, F. H. Pitts, *Inclusion through the platform economy?* cit.; N. van

work in the Global North substitutes on the one hand ‘servant work’ that previously occurred in the informal economy and, on the other hand, unpaid work delivered to socially reproduce one own’s family and household<sup>(11)</sup>. Platforms usually only partially formalize this work, subsuming workers into the labor force under contracts – such as self-employed contractor – that neither protect them nor open up the empowering possibilities they promise<sup>(12)</sup>. The recent European Directive on Platform Work represents an attempt to increase workers’ rights, benefits, and protections. It does so by introducing the presumption that a person performing platform work is in an employment relationship whenever there is evidence of control and direction, established according to national law, collective agreements or practice in force<sup>(13)</sup>.

In high-income societies, platforms offering domestic and care services have grown to fill the void left by collective welfare state provisions cut through subsequent waves of neoliberal austerity policies, resulting in a generalized crisis of public care. The retrenchment of the welfare state has been particularly hard on households due to the coeval growth in the women’s employment, as women have historically taken on the lion’s share of unpaid reproductive work. This has exacerbated the conflict between paid work and unpaid socially reproductive work in dual-earner and (female) single-headed households, creating a rising demand for domestic and care services on the (informal) market and, increasingly, in the modalities enabled by platforms. Huws goes as far as positing that online platforms for the provision of household services were born in the crisis of 2008<sup>(14)</sup>.

The extant literature on care and domestic services platforms has produced the important insights, in particular on the position of (minoritized) women in platform work and its nature in high-income countries as well as in the Global South<sup>(15)</sup>. Nonetheless, current analyses of the work and employment conditions of these platform workers fall short of clarifying how the reorganization of socially reproductive work through platforms relates to the contradictions inherent in capitalist societies. Yet the emergence of domestic and care services platforms cannot be explained merely as a reaction to a retrenching welfare state, the privatization of care and rising female employment. Rather, it should be understood systemically, against the background of a

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Doorn, D. Vijay, *Gig Work as Migrant Work: The Platformization of Migration Infrastructure, Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X211065049>.

<sup>(11)</sup> F. Flanagan, *Theorising the Gig Economy and Home-Based Service Work*, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2019, 61, 1, 57–78; U. Huws, *The hassle of housework: Digitalisation and the commodification of domestic labour*, *Feminist Review*, 2019, 123, 8-23.

<sup>(12)</sup> S. Joyce, *Rediscovering the cash nexus, again: Subsumption and the labour–capital relation in platform work*, *Capital & Class*, 2020, 44, 4, 541–552; P. Zanoni, F. H. Pitts, *Inclusion through the platform economy?* cit.

<sup>(13)</sup> C. Marzo, *The EU proposal of directive on platform work*, in P. Dieuaide, D. Kesselman, *Platform work and grey zones*, Teseo, 2024, forthcoming.

<sup>(14)</sup> U. Huws, *The hassle of housework* cit.

<sup>(15)</sup> A. Tandon, A. Rathi, *Care in the platform economy: Interrogating the digital organisation of domestic work in India*, in *The Gig Economy*, Routledge, 2021, 47-57; L. Poblete, F. Pereyra, A. Tizziani, *Digital Intermediation in Paid Domestic Work in Argentina* cit.



crisis of social reproduction and capitalist accumulation, as became particularly visible in 2008 and, more recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>(16)</sup>.

In this paper, we aim to advance the scholarly debate by theorizing platform work offering care and domestic services through the lens of social reproduction theory (SRT). This perspective allows to foreground that the current crisis of social reproduction is the contemporary manifestation of the structural contradictions, inherent in the capitalist economy, between the imperative of capital accumulation and the necessity to reproduce life delivering labor power that makes such accumulation possible<sup>(17)</sup>. Empirically, we draw from qualitative data collected with founders and managers, workers and clients of five Italian platform companies providing household cleaning (Helping and Batmaid), childcare (Babysits and Parentsmile), and social welfare services for children, elderly and disabled people (welfareX). Italy is a particularly suitable case for our purpose given the long-standing crisis of social reproduction of Italian society, which is characterized by a rapidly aging population, persisting high levels of labor market precarity and gender inequality in both paid and unpaid work<sup>(18)</sup>.

Our analysis reveals how care and domestic services platforms have their roots in the current crisis of social reproduction, whereby capitalism fails to socially reproduce life by providing adequate income and care to the population, a crisis that is most clearly observable in the life of women. Counter platform companies' own claim to be the solution to this crisis, we observe heterogeneous effects. On the one hand, platforms extracting rents from transactions between workers and clients deepen the crisis by expanding informal gendered work on a larger scale. On the other hand, platforms proactively setting the terms of employment buffer the crisis by enabling the recognition of care and domestic work as "real work". The study advances the extant literature by showing how a SRT lens shifts the debate from a legal one, which focuses on the (mis)classification of platform workers and its consequences in terms of social protection and working conditions, to a more explicitly political one that foregrounds how platforms' business models reorganize socially reproductive work in ways that redistribute costs, risks, and income. In this latter perspective, the law is reconfigured as one of the key means to obtain platform workers' rights through social struggle.

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<sup>(16)</sup> N. Fraser, *Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism*, in T. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, Pluto Press, 2017; A. Mezzadri, *Social reproduction and pandemic neoliberalism: Planetary crises and the reorganisation of life, work and death*, *Organization*, 2022, 29, 3, 379-400; P. Zanoni, *Whither Critical Management and Organization Studies? For a performative critique of capitalist flows in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic*, *Journal of Management Studies*, 2020, DOI: 10.1111/joms.12655.

<sup>(17)</sup> T. Bhattacharya, *Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory*, in T. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, Pluto Press, 2017; L. Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983.

<sup>(18)</sup> Istat, *Rapporto annuale 2023. La situazione del Paese*, <https://www.istat.it/storage/rapporto-annuale/2023/Rapporto-Annuale-2023.pdf>, 2023.

## 2. Platform-mediated domestic and care work and the crisis of social reproduction: A Social Reproduction Theory approach

SRT is a productive lens to theorize domestic and care services platforms as part of capitalism because it foregrounds how the capitalist economy fundamentally depends, for its functioning, on both unpaid and paid socially reproductive work carried out in the home and communities as well as by welfare state services and services organized through the market. Its core assumption is that «the provision of food, clothing, shelter, basic safety, and health care, along with the development and transmission of knowledge, social values, and cultural practices and the construction of individual and collective identities»<sup>(19)</sup> does not only produce life, but also, by so doing, the labor-power necessary to generate economic value. Labor-power is a «unique commodity» in that, while it is not produced capitalistically<sup>(20)</sup>, it represents an indispensable condition for capitalism to reproduce itself.

Marxist analyses of capitalist exploitation traditionally focused on waged work carried out in the production sphere, for an employer. Yet in the 1970s, SRT activists and scholars shifted attention to the socially reproductive work largely carried out by women, and disproportionately by racialized women from the lower classes and the Global South. They posited that it is this symbolically and economically devalued work outside the workplace that makes capital accumulation possible in the first place<sup>(21)</sup>. Both the work carried out to produce commodities and the work carried out to reproduce people are «part of the systemic totality of capitalism»<sup>(22)</sup>, where the spaces of production of value and the spaces for reproduction of labor-power are co-dependent<sup>(23)</sup>.

SRT crucially observes that it is precisely in this relation of mutual dependency that the contradictions inherent in capitalism become most visible. On the one hand, capitalism needs to create the conditions ensuring the reproduction of workers carrying suitable labor-power for the needs of production, through the wage and the financing of collective welfare state services. On the other hand, capital needs to keep wages and taxes as low as possible to maximize surplus value for capital accumulation to take place.

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<sup>(19)</sup> K. Bezanson, M. Luxton, *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006, 3; I. Bakker, S. Gill, *Power, Production, and Social Reproduction: Human In/security in the Global Political Economy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

<sup>(20)</sup> T. Bhattacharya, *Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(21)</sup> T. Bhattacharya, *Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory*, *op. cit.*; M. Dalla Costa, J. Selma, *Women and the subversion of the community*, Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972; S. Federici, *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*, Oakland: PM Press, 2012; C. Katz, S. A. Marston, K. Mitchell, *Demanding Life's Work*, in K. Meehan, K. Strauss Kendra (eds.), *Precarious Worlds. Contested Geographies of Social Reproduction*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, Georgia (USA), 2015; L. Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(22)</sup> Bhattacharya T., *Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory*, *op. cit.*, 20.

<sup>(23)</sup> C. Katz, S. A. Marston, K. Mitchell, *Demanding Life's Work*, *op. cit.*; T. Bhattacharya, *How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class*, in T. Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, Pluto Press, 2017.



This contradiction plays out on women who, in contemporary capitalism, are expected to be at once be maximally available as for production, as carriers of labor-power, and to carry out the work ensuring the social reproduction of others' labor-power. SRT points to the key role welfare state services collectivizing reproductive work play in buffering this contradictory relation<sup>(24)</sup>. In so doing, this approach expands the terrain of social struggle beyond the wage and working conditions in the workplace into the welfare state. This perspective aligns with the autonomist idea that capitalism does not stop at the factory doors but rather that the capitalist process of accumulation increasingly concerns the totality of society, turning it into a 'social factory'<sup>(25)</sup>.

The retrenchment of the welfare state since the 1980s in many high-income countries has progressively deepened the crisis of care, albeit in different modalities depending on the context. Care work that had previously been collectivized has since returned to families and communities and more specifically women within them. Households with sufficient financial resources have partially commodified care, often displacing it along «global care chains»<sup>(26)</sup> that leave the gendered division of care labor intact, while reproducing class and racial inequalities among women.

Importantly, the squeezing of a key set of social capacities is not simply a crisis of care, but is «best interpreted as a more or less acute expression of the social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism» that «tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies»<sup>(27)</sup> due to its imperative of unlimited accumulation. In this sense, domestic and care services platforms represent a key site where this crisis of social reproduction manifests itself and can be empirically investigated. Our analysis is guided by the following questions: What role do domestic and care services platform play in the crisis of social reproduction in contemporary capitalism? Which novel possibility of social struggle do they open up?

### 3. The Italian case

Italy is a particularly significant country for studying the platformization of socially reproductive work as the symptom of the long-standing crisis of social reproduction and capitalism more broadly. The country is characterized by a unique combination of an old and declining population<sup>(28)</sup>, familistic gender arrangements and

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<sup>(24)</sup> T. Bhattacharya, *Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory*, *op. cit.*; L. Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(25)</sup> M. Tronti, *La fabbrica e la società* [The factory and society], *Quaderni Rossi*, 1962, 2, 1-31.

<sup>(26)</sup> N. Yeates, *Global care chains: a state-of-the-art review and future directions in care transnationalization research*, *Global Networks*, 2012, 12, 2, 135-154.

<sup>(27)</sup> N. Fraser, *Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism*, in T. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, Pluto Press, 2017, 53-54.

<sup>(28)</sup> Istat, *Indicatori demografici anno 2023*, [https://www.istat.it/it/files//2024/03/Indicatori\\_demografici.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files//2024/03/Indicatori_demografici.pdf), 2024.

minimal welfare service<sup>(29)</sup>, a labor market characterized by high levels of precarity and gender inequality<sup>(30)</sup>, and low and stagnating wages compared to other European countries<sup>(31)</sup>.

Moreover, Italy shows strong gender imbalances in the labor market. Despite progress in recent years, Italy remains, together with Malta and Greece, one of the European countries with the lowest share of women in employment. For the 20-64 age cohort, in 2022, the share of employed women is 55 per cent, compared to 69 per cent for the EU27<sup>(32)</sup>. In the 2023 edition of the Global Gender Report<sup>(33)</sup>, Italy ranks 34th out of 146 countries in the dimension “economic participation and opportunity”. Moreover, according to the same source, the gender gap in time spent on unpaid domestic and care work is high, with 20.4% for women and 8.4% for men. This average however hides important geographical, educational and care burden inequalities: the employment rate for women aged 25-49 varies from 21.4% for mothers with low educational qualifications in Southern Italy to 92.7% for women with a university degree living alone in the North.

The care needs of the population are only minimally met by the Italian public welfare system. Italy still predominantly adheres to the traditional “familistic model” and has most specifically transitioned over the last decades from the “family model of care” to the “migrant in the family” model of care, where large numbers of immigrant women are replacing the unpaid care work of female family members<sup>(34)</sup>.

A recent mapping of the platforms active in Italy in education and childcare, physical and mental health and social care sectors indicates that most were national companies: out of 137, only 16 were founded abroad<sup>(35)</sup>. The only available data on platform care work were collected through the INAPP Participation, Labour, Unemployment, Survey (PLUS) of 2021<sup>(36)</sup>. Domestic work, captured by the questionnaire through examples related to cleaning and plumbing, accounted for 9.2% of platform work.

Tellingly, while Italy has had laws and jurisprudence protecting delivery platform workers as early as 2019 (Law 2 November 2019, n. 128), it has to date no specific

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<sup>(29)</sup> C. Solera, *Cura e riproduzione sociale: ripensare la cittadinanza*, *Parolechiave*, 2020, 2, 129-138, doi: 10.7377/100542

<sup>(30)</sup> C. Morini, *Vite lavorate: Corpi, valore, resistenze al disamore*, Manifestolibri, 2022.

<sup>(31)</sup> N. Giangrande, *La questione salariale in Italia. Un'analisi sulle cause dei bassi salari*, <https://files.cgil.it/version/c:OTRiYzM2YWYtNTdhNi00:ZDI1MzAxYzItYzE5NC00/Studio%20Salari%20in%20Italia.pdf>, 2024; F. De Novellis, *Il triennio peggiore per i salari italiani*, *lavoce.info*, 2024, <https://lavoce.info/archives/104554/il-triennio-peggiore-per-i-salari-italiani/>.

<sup>(32)</sup> Istat, *Rapporto annuale 2023. La situazione del Paese*, <https://www.istat.it/storage/rapporto-annuale/2023/Rapporto-Annuale-2023.pdf>.

<sup>(33)</sup> World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*, [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf)

<sup>(34)</sup> F. Bettio, A. Simonazzi, P. Villa, *Change in care regimes and female migration: the ‘care drain’ in the Mediterranean*, *Journal of European social policy*, 2006, 16, 3, 271-285.

<sup>(35)</sup> I. Pais (ed.), *Il welfare alla prova delle piattaforme*, Milano: Fondazione Feltrinelli, 2024.

<sup>(36)</sup> <https://www.inapp.gov.it/en/surveys/periodic-surveys/participation-labour-unemployment-survey-plus>.

regulation in place for other platform jobs. Domestic platform jobs in particular remain largely undeclared work, despite the public visibility of platforms themselves<sup>(37)</sup>.

#### 4. The platform companies

The research is based on five case studies chosen to cover a variety of services ranging from family care (Babysits, Parentsmile, welfareX), to domestic cleaning (Helping, Batmaid). Moreover, we included platform companies with diverse business models, as they distribute costs, risks and income differently between platforms, clients and workers, affecting workers' and clients' conditions of social reproduction. Babysits and Helping are "on demand" or "matching" platforms<sup>(38)</sup>. Like most, they do not intervene in setting the terms of work, but rather generate income by extracting rent on the transactions they facilitate through their infrastructures<sup>(39)</sup>. On the contrary, Batmaid, Parentsmile and welfareX enter into the transactions between workers and clients in various ways, fundamentally shaping the terms on which work is sold and bought through the platform.

The interviews in Babysits, Parentsmile and welfareX were conducted between 2021 and 2023 as part of the *WePlat: Welfare systems in the age of platforms* research project funded by Fondazione Cariplo to a research consortium led by Università Cattolica (<https://www.weplat.it/>)<sup>(40)</sup>. The interviews in Helping and Batmaid were conducted by the lead author between 2018 and 2023<sup>(41)</sup>.

Babysits was founded in The Netherlands in 2008 to provide childcare services. Today it is active in 82 countries worldwide. The platform has been operating in Italy since 2017, and has a quite homogeneous distribution of workers across the whole national territory. Babysits offers a platform for communication between families and babysitters. Babysitters are not hired by the platform and the platform does not directly carry out the matching between them and clients. In 2022, according to data provided by the company, almost 12,611 babysitters and 5,513 parents registered and 1,571 transactions were carried out through the platform. Only 35% of the babysitters are over 25 and only 2% are male.

Helping is a German company offering domestic cleaning services currently active in 11 countries. Founded in 2014, it was financed through a venture capital

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<sup>(37)</sup> L. De Vita, A. Bertolini, *Underpaid or Uberpaid? The Platformisation of the Domestic and Care Work*, *Critical Sociology*, forthcoming; K. Jaehrling, F. Pereyra, L. Poblete, *Introduction: The formalization of paid domestic work – Current trajectories and challenges ahead*, *International Labour Review*, 2024, 163, 3, 359-377.

<sup>(38)</sup> A. Tandon, A. Rathi, *Care in the platform economy: Interrogating the digital organisation of domestic work in India*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(39)</sup> P. Langley, A. Leyshon, *Platform capitalism: The intermediation and capitalisation of digital economic circulation*, in *Finance and Society*, 2017, 3, 1, 11–31.

<sup>(40)</sup> I. Pais (ed.), *Il welfare alla prova delle piattaforme*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(41)</sup> I. Pais, A. Marcolin, *Digital platforms in the Italian domestic care sector: The emergence of an unprecedented corporate logic and its implications for workers' social protection*, *International Labour Review*, 2024, 163, 3, 397-415.

investment of €56.5 million. Its operations in Italy started in the same year and are today present in three large cities: Milan, Rome and Turin. Helping Italy website states that «domestic workers are not employees of the company, but independent partners». Workers define their own hourly wage, but Helping suggests a price that, based on the country manager's statement, is calculated based on the average price in the informal market at territorial level. Helping Italy had 160 workers in June 2023. Workers on Helping include a higher percentage of men (23%) than the rest of the sector (12%), and more Italians (43% compared to 29%). The most represented age group is 51–60 (28%).

Batmaid was launched in Switzerland in 2015 offering domestic cleaning services. The company began its international expansion after securing major funding of 30 million Swiss francs in two rounds in 2021, opening operations in Italy, Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands and Poland. In Italy, it operates in Milan, Bologna and Turin. Initially, Batmaid established formal employment contracts with the worker on behalf of the family, but during the Covid-19 pandemic it started to hire cleaners directly. In Italy, Batmaid applies the National Collective Labour Agreement for the multi-services sector, and workers are offered a part-time contract, with a fixed rate per hour of 8 euro (while families pay for the service from 22 to 26 euros per hour). As of May 2023, Batmaid Italy had 50 employees working as cleaners, all of them are female, almost all of them migrants and the most represented age group is 41–50 (45%).

Parentsmile includes services to support parenting and promote psycho-physical well-being at the family level through home-based services (e.g. childminder, pedagogue, osteopath, etc.). The platform was founded in Italy and has been operational since the beginning of 2022. Initially, the platform benefited from a pre-seed investment of 400,000 euro by a business angel, followed by a further investment of 100,000 euro by Personae, an acceleration programme of the National Accelerator Network of CDP Venture Capital. The professionals of Parentsmile are freelancers and Parentsmile defines a standard price for each service category.

Finally, welfareX offers a wide range of personal services (child and elderly care, care for the disabled, educational services, etc.). The platform was created in Italy by CGMoving srl, a company founded in August 2020 by the National Consortium of Social Co-operation Gino Mattarelli (CGM) and Moving srl for the creation, promotion and management of welfare platforms. CGM is a co-operative group founded in 1987 that today includes 58 consortia, 701 co-operatives and social enterprises and 42,000 workers throughout Italy. welfareX includes 18 regional platforms that mainly act as a digital marketplace showcasing the services offered by the co-operatives and allow users/clients to book their services.

## 5. Methodology

We conducted 53 interviews with: the founders and managers of all platforms (8 in total, of whom 6 women), 32 individuals working through the platforms (14 in Babysits, all Italian women; 2 in Batmaid, all women, one migrant; 5 in Helping, of whom 4 men and of whom one is Italian; 3 in Parentsmile, all Italians, of whom 2 women; 8 in welfareX, all Italian women), and 14 clients (13 of welfareX, of whom 12 women and 1 woman of Parentsmile, all Italians). We complemented interview data with the analysis of the websites of the platform companies and internal documentation (for instance, statistics on the socio-demographic characteristics of workers) provided to us by our respondents. The interviews were conducted remotely, through video conferencing systems or telephone, and lasted between 1/2 h and 1 hour. They were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The interviews with founders and managers of the platforms covered the following topics: the history and characteristics of the platform, the platform governance, Human Resources Management, the complexity of tasks, key technologies and data processes. The interviews with workers were about socio-demographic information, training and work history prior to working on the platform, the functioning of the platform, registration and profile maintenance on the platform, control mechanisms on and off the platform, workers' use of the platform, customer relations, the reputational system, employment contract, working conditions, and collective representation. The interviews with clients collected socio-demographic information, how they access the platform, motivations for using the platform, profile building and maintenance, use of the platform, the reputational system, and relations with the worker.

The interview transcripts were coded through NVivo. We first went through them to reconstruct the different cases in their entirety from the different perspectives of the three types of respondents. We then identified and coded thematically fragments describing workers' and customers' motivations for joining the platform, as reflecting the current crisis of social reproduction. In a third phase, we identified the legal work status and terms of platform work (informal, employed, cooperant, self-employed) and related them to the deepening or buffering the crisis of social reproduction for workers. Finally, we reflected on the potential of certain models of care and domestic services platform to revalue care and domestic work and offer new opportunities of workers' collective mobilization.

## 6. Findings

We present the insights generated by our analysis in three sections. First, we show how the emergence of platforms of care and domestic work reflects the crisis of social reproduction in its multifarious manifestations. We then unravel how different types of



platforms have quite opposite effects on platform workers, either reproducing and deepening this crisis or buffering it.

*Platforms as a manifestation of the crisis of social reproduction*

The narratives of clients, workers and managers of all care and domestic services platforms coalesce to show how the emergence of platform companies reflects a deep and pervasive crisis of care in Italy. They unveil how social reproduction needs to be organized around production. This is clearly visible in the narratives of clients who are no longer able to provide care themselves when it is needed. The unpredictability of their own working hours, increasing geographical mobility and work extensification processes result in a demand for care services whose defining quality is their immediate availability:

The good thing (of the platform) is definitely the flexibility. In the sense that the service is almost immediate, you just check the hourly availability for the service you need and you see the availability immediately. For the childminder you can also book for the next day. (Client, Parentsmile, woman, 34 years old, two children)

The social reproduction needs clients seek to meet through the platform are also very prominent in the narratives of workers:

During the first meeting, they (the platform clients) asked me if I could spend the night, because they worked night shifts. Then, if I had flexibility, because she was not sure about the hours, since every month, or even every week, their shifts change. (Worker, Babysits, woman, 24 years old, student and babysitter)

I worked for a year for a family that came from Milan, had moved here temporarily, and they had no difficulty at all in entrusting me with their child without ever having met me, except through a platform. I was very surprised. They told me: 'We come on day one, on day two you show up and we leave our son with you.' (Worker, Babysits, woman, 57 years old, babysitter)

I work mainly with self-employed mothers who, as soon as they recover from childbirth, need to work a few hours and say: 'OK, let's make an investment of six months: half a day with a childminder. (Worker, Parentsmile, woman, 37 years old, babysitter)

On the other hand, platform workers are pulled into platform work because they themselves need the flexibility offered by platforms to care for their own families, in the absence of collective services against the background of a minimal welfare state which



fails to collectivize social reproduction. They are largely women who need a job yet are at the margins of the labour market, for instance because of their age or due to their career interruption to care for their household and family members. Others turn to the platform to find work at times compatible with their current care commitments and are forced to trade hourly flexibility for other dimensions of work and employment quality:

I was a clerk for thirty-odd years, then I reached a certain age and found myself without a job... At my age, even for cleaning no one would hire me, they want younger people or women from the Philippines. On Helping people choose based on the feedback score, how many cleanings you've done, so for me it was a way to bypass the age problem. (Worker, Helping, woman, 62 years old, cleaner)

I did something else for many, many years. Then I had to stop working. I had to take care of myself. When I came back to work, I had a very long but very sectoral experience and I could no longer do the work I did before. I was a florist. I was running my own business. It is not easy to recycle yourself when you are almost fifty, especially if you have three children. (Worker, Babysits, woman, 57 years old, babysitter)

Platform workers are also young people who need additional income to socially reproduce themselves for instance during their university studies. Platforms allow them to work at times compatible with their study commitments and help them find clients in places where they do not have the social capital to find work through word of mouth. A student told us:

So, they initially asked for an acquaintance period, where I was paid anyway, and then they called me occasionally at the time. Let's say I was comfortable with this. Because I was studying anyway, I didn't want to work too much at the expense of my studies. So, it suited me just fine (...) I knew the Babysits app because I had lived in Spain, doing an Erasmus exchange, where I didn't know anyone. In Italy I knew someone anyway, so if I needed to be a babysitter on call, I had my contacts, but there I didn't. So, I had found this site, where I had signed up. I had found it very convenient because it gives you the possibility to enter time slots and what not. So, I would enter my available times, for example slots between classes. (Worker, Babysits, woman, 24 years old, student and babysitter)

The platforms themselves claim to help both clients and workers resolve conflicts between work and other roles in life by offering them flexibility:

A platform is a meeting place, but also a means to facilitate lives and, in particular Babysits, to enable the balancing of work and personal life. (Manager, woman, Babysits)

All the support you ever wanted, and never thought existed, is now a reality. For the couple who has been trying for months, for the woman worried that pregnancy will halt her career, for the mum who can't sleep at night and for the one who can't get breastfeeding started, for the dad fed up with his baby's 'terrible two' tantrums, for the parents worried about their teenage daughter's eating disorders, for the woman experiencing typical menopausal discomfort... Parentsmile is for all family members, whoever they are. (Website, Parentsmile)

They consistently emphasise the immediacy of the service for clients who need support at home and do not have much time to look for a helper:

Through Helping, you can book a cleaner in 60 seconds. Once you have booked a cleaner you should arrange with them what specific cleaning tasks you would like them to undertake, for example ironing or oven cleaning. (Helping website)

Are you looking for a babysitter or a babysitting job? Quickly find a part-time or full-time babysitting job or find reliable local babysitters on Babysits. (Babysits website)

Platforms thus clearly position themselves as a response to the social reproduction needs for both clients and workers<sup>(42)</sup>. More specifically, as argued by Huws<sup>(43)</sup>, platforms enable the needs of time-poor households to be met through the labour of the money-poor.

#### *Platforms as deepening the crisis of social reproduction*

However, platforms are not only the product of this generalized crisis of care. They also themselves play an active role in reproducing and deepening it. Employing people with care responsibilities who seek "temporal autonomy" in their work<sup>(44)</sup>, they reproduce a patriarchal family ideology of women's work as subordinate to their unpaid care work in the household and their wages as «pin money»:

Worker availability is limited because there are a lot of mums with two children that only use the platform for working two hours every two days when the children are at school. (Manager, woman, Helping)

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<sup>(42)</sup> J. Ticona, A. Mateescu, *Trusted strangers: Carework platforms' cultural entrepreneurship in the on-demand economy*, *New Media & Society*, 2018, 20, 11, 4384-4404.

<sup>(43)</sup> U. Huws, *The hassle of housework* cit.

<sup>(44)</sup> M. Wallis, *Digital labour and social reproduction—Crowdwork in Germany and Romania*, in *spheres: Journal for Digital Cultures*, 2021, 6, 1-14; J. Berg, M. Furrer, E. Harmon, U. Rani, M. S. Silberman, *Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work. Towards Decent Work in the Online World*, Geneva, International Labour Office, 2018.

This is the case of platforms such as Helping and Babysits, which operate as intermediaries of informal work: they facilitate the matching of supply and demand, but do not act as employers or verify that the client formalizes the contract with the worker. As a result, they create work opportunities outside a legal contract and thus without social protection. While the European Directive on Platform Work provides the basis to counter the misclassification of workers, it does not help fight against the intermediation of informal work by platforms. Unlike word of mouth which clearly operates in the informal sphere, platforms may purposively generate ambiguity, letting clients assume that the platform operates as a regular employment agency. This ambiguity is illustrated by the following fragment from the Helping website:

Employers who want to employ a domestic helper have the option of signing an employment contract, but many complain that this alternative is not fast enough. Complicated bureaucratic procedures have to be followed, pay, contributions and severance pay have to be calculated, the relationship with the domestic helper has to be regulated, holidays and various costs have to be taken into account. (Helping website)

The implicit logical consequence of the problem of “complex bureaucratic procedures” should be that Helping deals with it and formalizes the contract. Instead the text concludes with a particularly ambiguous statement, which hides the fact that the company does not formalize the contract and in this way reinforces undeclared work:

Fortunately, Helping offers a simple, fast and secure option: through our platform you can find and book online, in just a few clicks, an available domestic helper in your area. The use of the platform is simple and intuitive, allowing you to set weekly hours or to book a cleaner for a single appointment, with clear and transparent prices. (Helping website)

Interviews with people working for these platforms reveal the precarious nature of their job, which offers no stability or social protection:

This is the worst thing about this platform (...), you don't know how it will end (...) because a person working without a contract is worth nothing. (Worker, Helping, man, 35 years old, cleaner)

The accident insurance disappeared, without even informing the customer. We got an e-mail one day saying that this accident insurance was no longer there. (...) During the selection interview in 2017 I had asked what the situation was like fiscally. Never got an answer, basically the unspoken was “don't declare it” (...) Then when there was Covid, in the early days you had to make a self-certification to declare that you left home

to work. At a certain point an email came from them saying that if someone asked us - it was explicitly written in the email - Helping was not to turn up. Why should it not appear? Because it's not a very legal thing that they do. It's a bit of an assault thing, a bit like the riders, you don't have protection, you don't have guarantees, you don't have anything, absolutely nothing. (...) Then at a certain point, partly because of this pandemic story and partly because at that time I had a problem with my foot and I had difficulty walking, I said 'look, for the moment suspend my account because I am in this situation, I have difficulty walking'. They didn't suspend it, they actually closed it. (Worker, Helping, woman, 62 years old, cleaner)

In this sense, these platforms do not merely reflect the crisis of social reproduction but also further deepen it by offering precarious jobs that do not enable workers to socially reproduce themselves. At the same time, platforms appropriate the resources acquired by workers in the private sphere, and in particular the skills learned in family care work. In this way, these workers and the life skills they embody are turned from 'idle' human resources into 'economic assets':

Everyone thinks that it is easy, but you cannot improvise. (...). You need to know about chemistry, new products on the market and what product is suitable for which surface. (Worker, Helping, man, 47 years old, cleaner)

This appropriation by capital of the skills acquired in the sphere of social reproduction is common in traditional forms of undeclared care work. However, the platform standardizes, formalizes and thus normalizes it as human capital in the construction of workers' digital profile.

Some workers even privately invest in the acquisition of skills through training to meet the demands made by the clients:

I also had a mother on the site who asked me to use the Montessori method with her children, in English. So I took some specialised courses on the Internet, because I had never worked in English. Since the payment was good, I decided to take courses to fulfil the request. (Worker, Babysits, woman, 33 years old, babysitter and teacher)

They (the clients) all asks me if I have done the first aid course. Some ask me to repeat it immediately before starting work again. (Worker, Babysits, woman, 57 years old, babysitter)

The platform encourages this professionalization, making these skills visible, but does not support workers directly to learn them nor does it reward them. For these

platforms, workers' acquisition of expert knowledge is solely relevant for its commercial value, as a signal to clients that is likely to increase transactions<sup>(45)</sup>.

Despite the precarious working conditions, respondents are not involved in any form of collective representation of their interests. They argue that their work is not recognized and explicitly comparing their own situation with that of food delivery riders:

We are not riders, why should they (trade unions) protect us? We are only domestic workers. When I saw the rider demonstrations I thought 'something should be done for Helping too' but then what do you do? (...) Because you know what it is: I don't think anyone cares about the cleaning lady, it didn't even occur to me that there might be some association, someone who could take care of our situation. It's certainly a wrong idea on my part, but that's how I experienced it. In my mind the cleaning lady is the last woman on the bandwagon, even though I know that is wrong. Also because as long as I was in it didn't suit me, because I had to work and so it didn't suit me to go against them, then when I got out I thought I was just out. It's selfish, I know.... (Worker, Helping, woman, 62 years old, cleaner)

Not only do these platforms not improve the working conditions of the workers, they also appear not to make the traditionally gendered division of labor within client households more equitable. It is largely women who look for the services, contact, select and manage the relations with the platform and the platform worker. Moreover, in some cases, the digital nature of the transactions even strengthens women's dependence on their male partners, as a few respondents told us:

You can only pay with a credit card. And I don't have one, because I have an ATM and the ATM is not enabled for online purchases. I personally have to rely on my husband. So if I want to do something independently (on the platform), I cannot do it (Client, welfareX, woman, 43 years old, two children)

To tell you the truth, I don't have a credit card so I don't do the payment part. I usually do the research part and then my husband proceeds with the purchase... (Client, welfare, woman, 37 years old, two children)

Contrary to what they themselves claim, platforms do not solve the crisis of social reproduction of which they are manifestations, but often in many respects exacerbate it. Platforms operating as intermediaries between workers and clients tend to reproduce the existing gendered ideology of care and domestic work as not "real

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<sup>(45)</sup> D. Arcidiacono, F. Bonifacio, I. Pais, *Professionalization and informality in platform care services. The case of Babysits*, *Critical Sociology*, forthcoming.

work”<sup>(46)</sup> and, relatedly, not to adequately recognize the skills acquired in the social reproductive sphere or even professionally. In this sense, traditional forms of undeclared work, outside the boundaries of labor law, the National Collective Labour Agreements, and the protections they foresee, are normalized and even amplified through the platform as suitable for women who are marginalized in the labor market<sup>(47)</sup>. At the same time, female clients retain the main responsibility for relating to these workers, reproducing the traditional gendered division of care and domestic work within the household through the purchase of platform workers’ services.

### *Platforms as buffers to the crisis of social reproduction*

However, how platforms insert themselves in the contemporary crisis of care is not univocal. The cases of welfareX, Batmaid and Parentsmile rather point to the potential of platforms to buffer the crisis of social reproduction. Different from most care and domestic services platforms, they rest on alternative business models, which provide higher income and social protection than what would be available to workers in the informal economy, where these services have historically been offered. They do so by contracting workers in existing legal work statuses and related contractual forms under Italian law. For each, we indicate how this is achieved.

In the case of welfareX, workers are employed by the already existing cooperatives of CGM. Unlike standard models of platform cooperativism<sup>(48)</sup>, which are based on the creation of a new cooperative of which platform workers are members, this startup digitizes already existing cooperatives. This entails that platform workers are cooperative members, and enjoy better conditions and protection under Italian legislation than workers in the informal (platform) economy.

The cooperatives offer protection to its workers by hiding their profiles from individual clients’ view. This reduces the risk of discrimination, for instance based on age, gender, race and ethnicity, and enhances the labor market position of minoritized groups. This protection, however, is not applied when clients are companies. The manager explained to us:

So we indicate which cooperative is providing the service and the name of the actual service. We do not put the names of the operators. We indicate the name and profile of the operator only when we work within the companies. Because the companies like it a little bit, that it said Ilaria will follow you rather than someone else.

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<sup>(46)</sup> P. Gonalons-Pons, *Servants of production: The politics of domestic workers’ labor rights*, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 2022, 29, 3, 932–954.

<sup>(47)</sup> C. Benvegnù, N. Kampouri, *Platformization beyond the point of production: Reproductive labor and gender roles in the ride-hailing and food-delivery sectors*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 2021, 120, 4, 733-747.

<sup>(48)</sup> T. Scholz, *Platform cooperativism: Challenging the corporate sharing economy*, New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2016.



On the other hand, on the more personal services side, we do not specify who it is that then provides the service (Manager, man, welfareX).

The combination of a cooperant workers status and partial anonymity through the digital infrastructure points to the potential of the platform to increase the protections for a diverse labor force. To the degree that it extends the possibility to earn a living wage from socially reproductive work carried out in a better protected status, it increases the recognition for this work and contributes to buffering the crisis of social reproduction for these workers and their clients<sup>(49)</sup>.

The second case is Batmaid, the only domestic cleaning platform operating in Italy that directly hires workers, providing the protections of salaried employment, while allowing them working hours flexibility<sup>(50)</sup>. This case shows that regular employment and social protection of platform workers is possible<sup>(51)</sup>. At the same time, it should be noted that workers receive only 8 euro of the 26 euro per hour clients pay for an occasional service. Moreover, to respond to the frequent working hour changes requested by private clients, Batmaid only offers part-time contracts to workers (15 hours a week), which they intend to further reduce to 10 hours a week:

With Batmaid, I have a contract and an insurance, but I can also work when my children are at school. (Worker, Batmaid, woman, 43 years old, cleaner)

A contract for 10 hours a week would enable the worker to earn a decent salary, and we are highly confident of securing this number of hours. (Manager, man, Batmaid)

The company justifies these contractual terms by declaring that this is in the interests of female workers, who prefer reduced hours to meet their family commitments. In this case, we observe more ambiguous effects. On the one hand, the platform offers the employment status that provides maximal social protection, enhancing the recognition of cleaning work and treating it as “real work,” an essential condition to improve employment conditions<sup>(52)</sup>. On the other hand, the platform enforces, through its own policies, the subordination of this paid work to workers’ unpaid socially reproductive work in their own household, reaffirming the gendered division of labor there.

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<sup>(49)</sup> P. Zanoni, F. H. Pitts, *Inclusion through the platform economy?* cit.

<sup>(50)</sup> I. Pais, A. Marcolin, *Digital platforms in the Italian domestic care sector* cit.

<sup>(51)</sup> C. Marzo, *Franco-British comparison of attempts to provide social protection for platform workers at the time of the pandemic: towards a new balance between public and private actors?*, *Revue de droit comparé du travail et de la sécurité sociale*, 2021, 4, 80-99; E. Kocher, *Digital work platforms at the interface of labour law: regulating market organisers*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022; G. Smorto, *Protecting the weaker parties in the platform economy*, in N. M. Davidson, M. Finck, J. J. Infranca (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of the law of the sharing economy*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

<sup>(52)</sup> P. Zanoni, *Labor market inclusion through predatory capitalism? The “sharing economy,” diversity, and the crisis of social reproduction in the Belgian coordinated market economy*, *op. cit.*

Finally, operating as a brokerage agency for skilled labor, Parentsmile centrally sets the price for services and verifies that VAT-registered workers invoice the provided services to their clients. This method is generally appreciated by professionals who operate through the platform, because the established rates are considered adequate, especially for young professionals who do not yet have an own established client base. At the same time, some interviewees note that this entails a high cost for clients, which can reduce the attractiveness of the services offered through the platform and consequently may result in fewer job opportunities for them.

The prices are decided by us, because we don't want to create the jungle that is created on other platforms, where there is a bit of a war on the bottom. We define everything. Clearly, there is a market analysis, an ex-ante benchmark is done to define the price ranges [...] I have to say that the professionals particularly appreciate the fact that the prices are set by us. (Manager, woman, Parentsmile)

Parentsmile's working conditions are excellent, however, the point is that I don't get enough clients and I think that pricing is one of Parentsmile's main problems. I find it absurd that a patient pays 80 euros for a first consultation with me. I think it's very off-market. (Worker, Parentsmile, man, 33 years old, osteopath)

Also in this case, the regulatory function taken on by the platform presents an interesting strategy to help ensure a minimum hourly remuneration for formally self-employed workers, which can reduce precarity. Nonetheless, the absence of a guarantee on a minimum amount of worked hours limits this potential.

These cases show the potential of alternative business models for care and domestic services platforms: from the combination of cooperant status and the removal of individual profiles, to the possibility for workers to choose their working hours while also enjoying the protections of employed work, up to the setting of adequate compensation for professionals. Albeit in different and incomplete ways, these measures all recognize care and domestic work as "real work" and variously attempt to better value and protect it, buffering to some extent the current crisis of social reproduction on workers' side. Their business model is fundamentally different from one based on the platform only as a digital infrastructure of communication and intermediation between clients and workers, which reproduces existing relations in the informal market of care and domestic services.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper has analyzed care and domestic services platforms through a SRT lens, which points to how the current crisis of social reproduction reflects the profound contradiction inherent in capitalism between the needs of production and the social

reproduction of life<sup>(53)</sup>. This contradiction is particularly visible in Italy, a country with persistent gender inequalities in the division of reproductive labor as well as paid work, and where care still largely rests on a familistic model and welfare services are residual. Interviews with clients, workers and managers of five Italian care and domestic work platforms reveal how these latter are grafted onto the crisis of care, reflecting the prolonged struggles of large strata of the Italian population – and women in the first place – to socially reproduce life against the background of precarious employment opportunities, stagnating real wages and the absence of affordable and flexible collective welfare services. This crisis manifests in a two-fold way: as a demand of services by women and families and as the emergence of a largely female workforce willing to provide such services through platforms and at the conditions imposed by them.

Our analysis unveils how platforms enable the exchange circuit of care and domestic work and money through different business models, which entail distinct statuses and social protections of their largely female platform workforce. On the one hand, “matching” platforms tend to deepen the crisis of social reproduction. Their business model – the most prevalent in Italy and in other high-income countries – provides the digital infrastructure to expand informal care and domestic work beyond historical social networks resting on word of mouth, and both rests on and reproduces the gendered ideology of care and domestic work as not “real work.” This precludes the recognition and protection of such work, as it has often been the case in the past<sup>(54)</sup>. Accordingly, it has been argued that these platforms providing socially reproductive services contribute to the so-called “feminization” of work, or the institutionalization of forms of less valued and protected employment which has historically been largely associated with women<sup>(55)</sup>. These platforms co-opt the “relative surplus population”, a reserve army of labour that is intermittently integrated into the process of capital accumulation as informal labor and below a living-wage<sup>(56)</sup>. These platforms thus deepen the crisis of social reproduction by de facto externalizing the costs of the social reproduction of their workers onto these latter, their families, the state and, ultimately even companies which do pay living wages and pay social security contributions for their workforce<sup>(57)</sup>.

On the other hand, three platforms in our study rest on different business models, which, despite their limitations, open up new opportunities to revalue and protect care and domestic work and workers. These platforms operate respectively as a cooperative, a regular employer, and a regulator of the terms of the exchange between

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<sup>(53)</sup> T. Bhattacharya, *Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory*, *op. cit.*; N. Fraser, *Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(54)</sup> P. Gonalons-Pons, *Servants of production: The politics of domestic workers' labor rights*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(55)</sup> P. Rodríguez-Modroño, A. Agenjo-Calderón, P. López-Igual, *A Feminist Political Economic Analysis of Platform Capitalism in the Care Sector*, *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 2023, 55, 4, 629–638.

<sup>(56)</sup> P. Zanoni, F. H. Pitts, *Inclusion through the platform economy?* *cit.*

<sup>(57)</sup> P. Zanoni, *Labor market inclusion through predatory capitalism? The “sharing economy,” diversity, and the crisis of social reproduction in the Belgian coordinated market economy*, *op. cit.*

clients and self-employed workers. They do not only act as “digital placement agencies” that negotiate wages and other conditions of work with the employers on behalf of workers<sup>(58)</sup>. They also anchor the worker and the transaction within existing legal statuses – as cooperative worker, employee, and self-employed worker – bringing with them the protections foreseen by the law.

These platforms’ classification of socially reproductive care and domestic work as “real” work is particularly significant because it deinstitutionalizes its exceptionality, aligning it to all other forms of ‘productive’ work. This reclassification opens up new opportunities for platform workers to aggregate and mobilize, as employees, for collective forms of representation, better work and employment conditions and social protection. In some cases, the struggle might even take the form of platform cooperatives owned and governed by the people who depend on and contribute to it<sup>(59)</sup> or (cooperative) organizations defending the interests of self-employed workers, including through political work to foster more inclusive social protection by the welfare state<sup>(60)</sup>. In this sense, we conclude that they buffer the crisis of social reproduction, although they are unable to resolve it, as it originates in the capitalist contradiction between capital accumulation and life.

At the same time, we identified some of these platforms’ limitations and new risks that pose for workers, including the reduction of working hours that push income below a living wage, despite and even because of the higher hourly pay. They at best mitigate class-based inequalities between “time-poor” and “money-poor” households and women<sup>(61)</sup> and might possibly re-entrench the gender division of labor between men and women in both client and workers’ households.

Our analysis points to the limitations of the European Platform Work Directive, which – while important – does not regulate the intermediation of undeclared work and in absence of control and direction by the platform. In this sense, it misses the opportunity to revalue reproductive work that has traditionally been undervalued and carried out by (ethnicized and racialized) women who are marginalized or excluded in the labour market. In transposing the European Directive on platform work in single EU member states, concerning care and domestic work platforms, it will be important to take into account national specificities not only concerning employment policies, but also with regard to welfare policies, as argued by Koutsimpogiorgos et al.<sup>(62)</sup> for the case of domestic cleaning platforms.

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<sup>(58)</sup> A. Tandon, A. Rathi, *Care in the platform economy: Interrogating the digital organisation of domestic work in India*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(59)</sup> T. Scholz, *Platform cooperativism: Challenging the corporate sharing economy*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(60)</sup> M. De Coster, P. Zanoni, *More than prefigurative politics? Redefining the institutional frames to reduce precarity under neoliberal capitalism*, *Organization Studies*, 2023, 44, 6, 939-960. DOI: 10.1177/01708406221113110

<sup>(61)</sup> Huws U., *The hassle of housework* *cit.*

<sup>(62)</sup> N. Koutsimpogiorgos, K. Frenken, A. M. Herrmann, *Platform adaptation to regulation: The case of domestic cleaning in Europe*, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 65, 2, 2023, 156-184.

In conclusion, this study investigated care and domestic work platforms as a still understudied, yet highly relevant type of platform, which grafts itself into contemporary economies and societies characterized by a crisis of production and social reproduction. A SRT lens shifts the debate from one concerning the correct legislation under which platform workers should fall to one about the different business models platforms adopt to organize socially reproductive work and to distribute costs, risks, and income in order to secure capital accumulation. Our analysis identified the possibilities for struggle opened up to workers by platforms operating through different business models and offering different legal statuses to them.

We emphasize that not even the most promising business models resolve the contradiction between social reproduction and production, as they operate within the market and in conformity with the imperative of capital to accumulate<sup>(63)</sup>. Platform workers' struggle should go hand in hand with struggles to collectivize care and domestic work and/or its cost<sup>(64)</sup> through the welfare state. As long as care and domestic work remains a family responsibility, purchased on the market by some women and offered by other ones, the platform will tend to privilege the interests and needs of the former above those of the latter<sup>(65)</sup>. Instead, society needs welfare state arrangements that recognize the essential nature of socially reproductive work and leverages platforms to restore the alliance between workers, citizens and the state for the regeneration of life.

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<sup>(63)</sup> T. Bhattacharya, *Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory*, *op. cit.*

<sup>(64)</sup> P. Zanoni, *Social reproduction theory as lens and method: Multiplying struggles for equality beyond the workplace*, in K. Saija, E. Bell, S. Meriläinen (eds.), *Handbook of Feminist Methodologies in Management and Organization Studies*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2024, 123-139.

<sup>(65)</sup> P. D. Culpepper, K. Thelen, *Are we all Amazon primed? Consumers and the politics of platform power*, *Comparative Political Studies*, 2020, 53, 2, 288-318.



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