

Exploited by design? On domestic cleaners, digital platforms, and working “holidays” in Berlin.

By Katarzyna Gruszka, Madeleine Böhm, and Anna Pillinger

Keywords: qualitative interviews; domestic work; platform labor, invisible labor; (in)visibility of platform labor; social reproduction; intersectionality;

Platforms mediating domestic and care work are a crucial infrastructure in the ongoing crisis of social reproduction (Altenried et al., 2021). While it became increasingly difficult for people to find cleaners and care-workers in their neighborhood, platforms opened up their world to a workforce that seemed to be readily available for cheap rates. Many workers are needed to preserve this image of the inexhaustible pool of profiles and workers to choose from. Especially for newcomers, these platforms seem to offer a likewise easy opportunity to connect with clients quickly. The platforms, then, can function as a stepping stone into the job market and a new city due to the low entrance barriers, easy onboarding processes, and high flexibility. However, what appears “easy” at first for most workers, turns into an ambivalent process for many: bureaucratic regulations are unclear, securities aren’t given, and there is very little space to maneuver oneself through an unregulated jungle while being rendered (in)visible. After all, these platforms operate in a sector characterized by precarious working conditions and a high share of informal labor, overwhelmingly often carried out by women and/or migrants - all in the privacy of households.

This paper zooms in on a group of people attracted to the opportunities platforms seem to offer - though often being aware of the exploitation at hand: Namely, young people from Latin America coming to Berlin, Germany, on a working holiday visa and taking on domestic cleaning work via Helpling - currently a key platform in the sector on the German market. We center stage this particular group of platform workers in a Berlin/Helpling case study and ask a set of questions: Who are the workers, and how does their experience reflect on the connection between social relations, social reproduction and a platform’s business model? What can we learn about the co-construction between an individual’s sociolegal status and performing platform-mediated cleaning through the (in)visibility lens?

By building on an analytical framework of (in)visibility of/in platform-mediated labor developed elsewhere (Gruszka & Böhm, 2020) and feminist approaches on intersectionality, we base our work on qualitative interviews with domestic cleaners and focus on unpacking the institutional (in)visibility of their work and them as workers. Preliminary results from the interviews indicate that platform companies benefit from the sociolegal status of people with working holiday visas and manage their platform accordingly, while workers navigate through a complicated and unknown field. We

analyze this relationship and ask how the worker's (in)visibility is affected and with which consequences. Thus, we speak to an audience working interdisciplinary on platform-mediated labor within the broader framework of the social consequences of platforms. By doing so, we contribute to debates on the challenges platform workers face with a clear analytical framework and highly up-to-date empirical material.